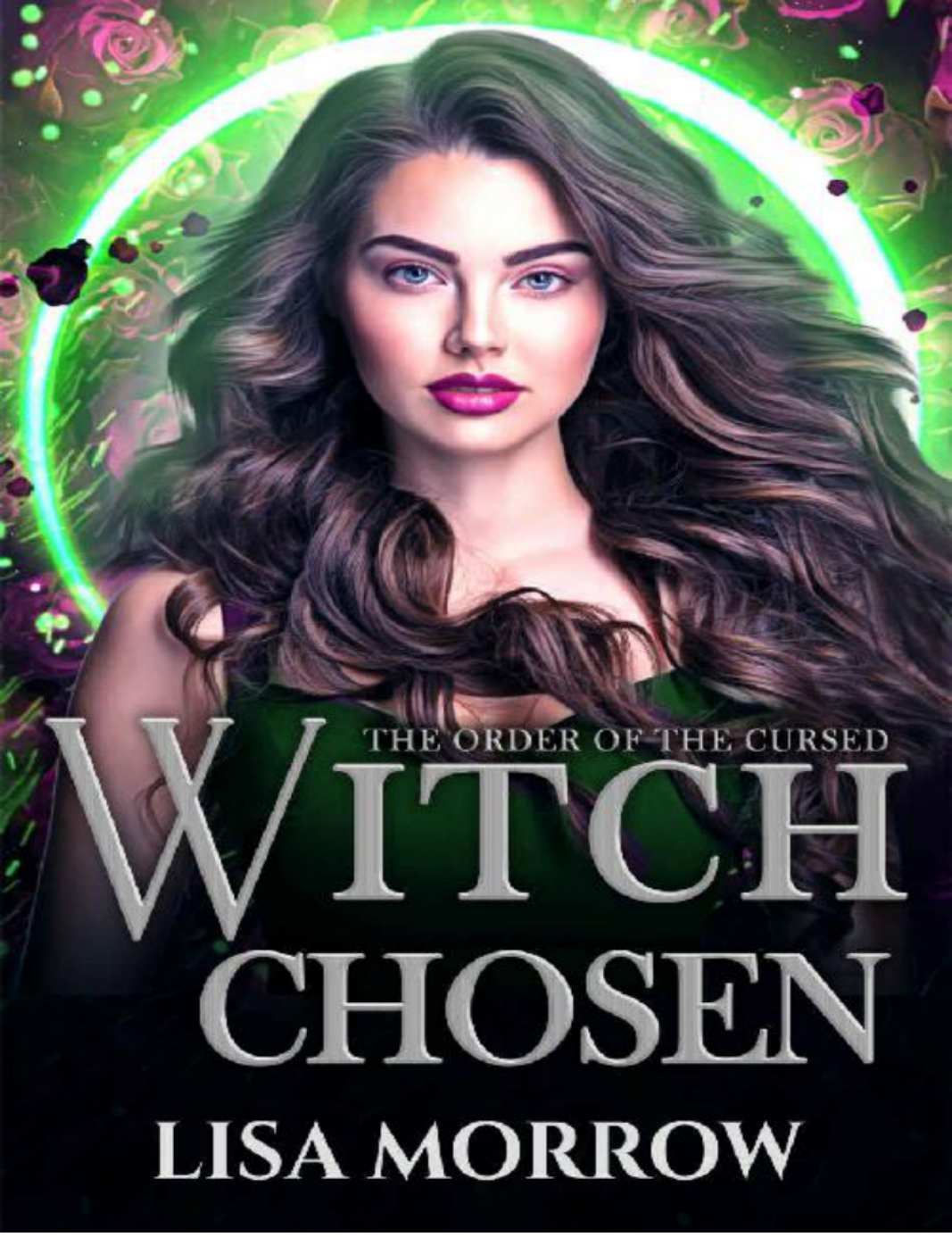
THE ORDER OF THE CURSED
WITCH
CHOSEN
LISA MORROW

Witch Chosen

The Order of the Cursed: Book 1

Lisa Morrow

Lisa Morrow

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To my parents -
who are the reason I believe in magic.

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Author's Note

This series features Greek goddesses, however, I'm not sticking exactly to the myths. I wanted to create a world where there were only female goddesses. So, for example, Zeus might rule all the gods in ancient Greek mythology, but in this series, Hera is the ruler of the gods.

I hope you enjoy this fun little twist to the classic myths!

List of Greek Goddesses Featured in This Book:

Demeter- Goddess of the Seasons

Eris- Goddess of Strife, Discord, and Destruction

Hera- Goddess of all Gods

Persephone- Goddess of Hell

Aphrodite- Goddess of Love

Hestia- Goddess of Fire and the Hearth

Athena- Goddess of War

Ananke- Goddess of the Shadows

Nyx- Goddess of the Night

Horae- The Twelve Goddesses of Time

Usha- Goddess of the Dawn, Nyx's Sister

Soteria- Goddess of Safety and Salvation

Abeona- Goddess of Outward Journeys and Time

Want to Reach Out to Lisa Morrow?

Lisa Morrow loves to hear from her readers! You can reach her in any of these ways:

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Blurb

For a small group of girls, The Choosing is the chance of a lifetime. The opportunity to leave behind miserable lives of poverty, move to a castle, and learn to use magic. But for Rose, it's more than that. If she isn't selected by the powerful order of witches, she'll be forced to marry a man she doesn't love, or watch her father be taken to the prisons.

So when Rose and her best friend are selected, they think all their dreams have come true. And yet, not everything is as it seems.

Is it possible that being Chosen means a worse fate than they ever imagined? And could a handsome boy become Rose's only ally in a fight she never imagined?

Being Chosen was just the beginning, now she needed to survive…

The Order of The Cursed is a young adult fantasy series of novellas with an epic adventure and a splash of sweet romance. It has witches, magic, secrets, and a tale you won't soon forget.

Rose

DRAGONS CIRCLED FAR OVERHEAD, their echoing roars like a warning of what was to come. Craning my head up to the sky, I watched the sunlight flash off their multi-colored scales, momentarily distracted from my own fears by their beauty.

And then, just as quickly as they had appeared, they darted away.

I stared after the dragons until they were nothing more than spots in a pure blue sky hung with patches of grey clouds. Then, I took a deep breath, and looked back at the door, my stomach turning. I seemed to be frozen in place, staring. Several times I willed myself to reach out and grasp the handle, but my body refused to obey.

The Queen's Man, Taris, had sent word my father's taxes were expected today. I'd gathered every copper I'd managed to save over the past year, but even so, felt the meager weight of the coin pouch in my hands with increasing dread. I'd been so desperate to avoid yet another one of Taris' verbal lashings that I'd attempted waking my father and sending him in my place.

It went about as well as could be expected. Unfortunately.

My father had sat up just long enough to take another swig of his ale, blink at me without comprehension, and drop his head back on the table. The sound of his snoring followed me out the door.

Closing my eyes, I willed myself to be strong. I tried to reassure myself by focusing on the most logical outcome of today. This would go as it had each year. Taris would chew me out, belittle me, and sneer his disgust, but swallowing my pride would buy us another year on the farm.

My eyes opened. With shaking hands, I reached for the handle.

The door swung open, and Taris looked up at me. Even though the top of his head barely reached my shoulders, his superior expression said he was looking down on me. "Finally here? All right then, come inside."

Squaring my shoulders, I followed him into his office, dropping the money pouch on his desk. The door closed behind me, sealing us into the sweltering room that stank of cheap perfume and sweat. Outside, I knew a pleasant breeze blew, but the only window was closed off by thick black curtains, keeping out the comforting scents of autumn.

His leather chair creaked as he sat down. “Let’s get this over with.”

Perching on the edge of the chair facing his desk, I watched in dread as he counted out each coin.

He took his time, letting the coins clink into a small pile in front of him, even though any fool could see we were terribly short. Again.

I clenched my hands tighter in my lap, willing my face to remain expressionless. “That’s all I have right now, but I’ll have more soon.”

Taris inspected each dull, brown coin between his stubby fingers before placing them back on the table in a neat pile. “Of course.”

With a confidence I didn’t feel, I raised my chin a fraction of an inch higher. “That’s most of it though.”

He leaned back in his chair, stroking the scruffy patch of blond hair on his chin. “*Most* of it is not all of it, as we both know, Rose.” He sighed loudly, but unconcealed satisfaction lit his beady eyes. “For years now, I’ve let you slide with fewer taxes than you owe. It seemed a terrible thing to me for a young girl to have no mother and a drunk as a father.”

I tried my hardest to look as if I believed the false sincerity in his voice because there was nothing to gain by calling him a liar. By letting the truth slip past my lips, *you do nothing out of kindness*.

He nodded as if satisfied by whatever he’d read in my face. “But there comes a point when even I can’t help you any longer. Your debt has become quite significant… enough to draw the attention of those higher ranking than myself.”

It had to be a lie. None of the queen’s debt collectors would care about the tiny sum owed by my father. Could they?

“What does that mean?” I asked, hating that fear crept into my words.

He heard it. A slight smile touched his lips. “It means that without someone to pay the sum owed, your father will be taken to a debtors’ prison.” This time his smile widened, as if he was unable to contain it. “And although your father seems a man strong of mind and body, his spirit seems quite another matter. I doubt he would survive his time there.”

My heart raced. “Once we finish harvesting the last of the crops—”

“You’ll come up short, just like every other year.” His stubby fingers went back to stroking the patch of hair on his chin. “Let’s cut to the heart of the matter, Rose, your father is a terrible farmer. And although I’ve seen you breaking your back and ruining the last of your

beauty working his fields, one young woman simply can't run a farm of that size by herself."

I gritted my teeth to hold back all the things I wanted to shout. Anger would get me nowhere with this man. And sometimes, life was more about surviving than pride. "We should get enough to cover this year's taxes."

"But not the past years."

I opened my mouth and closed it. No, not the past years.

Triumph shone in his eyes. "Lucky for you, I may have a way out of this… problem of yours."

Sweat gathered at my brow. The fire burned too brightly in the hearth, creating a sweltering heat in the tiny office. The heat, combined with my nerves, had my stomach rolling. This wasn't how today was supposed to be going. Always before, he'd lectured me and sent me on my way. What was he up to now?

"You know my son, Hefter, of course?" He reached out and picked up the tiny statue of the Goddess of War, Athena, off his desk, studying the strong lines of the fierce deity's face.

I nodded. Not only did Hefter look like a younger version of his father, but he was preparing to be one of Queen Gaudias' cruel soldiers. Two unforgivable qualities, in my mind.

"He's made no secret about his interest in you." He paused, letting his words sink in. "From the first time we came to this insignificant town, he's told me he plans to marry you one day." Again, he paused, studying me. "In all honesty, I can't see his attraction to you. Built like a man… and that dark hair and strange eyes. Well, you aren't what most would call beautiful."

The muscles in my legs bunched as I ached to stand, to shout in his ruthless face. But in that instant, the stone on my necklace warmed, startling me. I hesitated, feeling its heat between my breasts and knowing how unwise it was to ignore its warning.

"My son," he continued, unaware of my boiling temper, "is a man from a good family, who will one day leave this wretched town and earn a good living as a Queen's Man." He leaned closer. "In other words, a man who by all logic is too good for you."

I tried to keep my voice even but failed. "Yet, he wants me."

One of his brows rose at the venom in my words, and he slowly placed the statue back on his desk, facing me. "Yes, he does. But I can see that a girl like you has no sense at all, stringing him along but refusing him every step of the way—"

"Refusing him every step of the way is hardly stringing him along." I eyed the statue, imagining merriment in the cruel goddess's face.

He waved my words away. "As his loving father, I've come to terms with his… taste in women. And so, I have come up with a

solution that should serve all of us quite well." He pushed the pile of coins on the table towards me, sending them toppling over. "I shall pay your debt owed, as a bridal price, and you shall marry my son."

I should've seen it coming, and yet, I'd been so focused on maneuvering through our conversation, I hadn't. My jaw hung open. I could feel it. But, I couldn't close it. He was offering to *buy me* in exchange for paying off my father's debt?

"I'm not for sale," I said, swallowing past the lump in my throat.

His condescending laugh cut like a knife. "Rose, did you listen at all? This is more than a fair deal. You get a husband who is far too good for you, and your father doesn't have to die in a dark, filthy hole somewhere. You should be thanking me, not turning green."

I sucked in a deep breath, realizing my body wanted to throw up the contents of my pitiful lunch. "No."

"No?" The question held a dangerous note. "No to my offer? Because, my girl, that would be very, very unwise."

It would be. He'd punish me for my insolence, and go after my father.

The Queen's Men represented the queen, and so, held more power over every citizen of Tarak than such unworthy men should ever be allowed. Our lands would be taken, and I'd be left with no way to free my father from the prisons. That didn't mean I was going to sell myself like a prized cow, but nor could I flat out refuse him. I needed to buy myself some time.

I sat up straighter and looked him in the eye. Red had darkened his face and veins stood out on his neck. This was a man about to unleash his fury. "No. I can't possibly accept your offer without talking to my father first."

He eased back in his chair a bit. "I was under the impression your father cared very little about his unwanted child. But…" he shrugged, "the law does require his approval, so go home and ask it of him."

Rising from my chair, I purposely stared down at my boots. "Of course. However, since The Choosing Ceremony is tonight—"

"You can tell me his answer tomorrow," he interrupted. "But as you aren't the sort of girl who gets Chosen, I shall begin preparations immediately."

My stomach flipped. "As you will."

I turned to go, but his words stopped me. "Don't forget your coins."

With heavy footsteps, I took the coins off his desk and let them clink back into my money pouch. The statue of the goddess of war sat mocking me. *You've lost this battle*, she seemed to say.

A tiny part of me wanted to toss it down and watch it smash on the floor, to declare to them both that I hadn't lost yet. But if the

goddesses truly saw all, the last thing I wanted to do was anger one of them. Frustrated, I turned and walked away.

"And if you see my son, don't tell him. I want to give him the good news myself."

"Of course."

I left his office and stepped out into the streets of Duggery. The cool autumn air carried the heavy scent of smoked meat. People rushed by in the streets, talking and laughing in a lighthearted way that reminded me of the celebration about to take place. A few gazes clung to me, but only briefly before looking away.

But I didn't care that everyone in this town hated me. I needed to figure out a way to survive another year. The problem was… I was out of ideas.

Rose

THE REALITY of my situation fully hit me, and I felt a rise of panic unlike anything I'd felt before. Turning, I wandered down a little alley that would lead me to the small main road through my town. The thatch-roofs of the buildings crowded the dirt alley, casting everything in shadows and deepening the chill of the autumn day, before I came out on the other side into the sunlight. My feet hit the cobblestone of the main road, and I stumbled along, trying to fight the panic that continued to grow inside of me.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was aware of the unusual number of people on the street, already dressed in their finest clothes. They walked in the center of the road, unconcerned with carts or riders. Most of the merchant shops sat closed and empty, their occupants no doubt already preparing for the celebration. And yet, everything around me felt like a blur.

If I run away, where will I go? If I stay, is there anyway I won't have to marry Hefter? Around and around the thoughts went, but no answers came.

"Rose!"

I looked up as Sirena raced towards me. Although she was just another petite, fair-haired person on the road, I could've picked her out of any crowd. It wasn't that impressive though, not when she was my only friend in the world.

"How did it go?" she asked, holding out one of the pastries in her hands.

I shook my head, my stomach rolled in protest at just the sight of it. "Not good."

The merriment that was second-nature to my best friend left her eyes. She wrapped both the pastries in a handkerchief and shoved them into her pocket. "What happened? If that old crow yelled at you again about your *father's* debt—"

“No,” I interrupted. “It’s worse this time.”

All further explanation died on my lips. The implications of the marriage I’d be forced into came crashing on me all at once. My breathing stopped. My lungs burned as I fought to suck in air.

“This way.” She pulled me off the main road. “Just take deep breaths.” Her hand rubbed small circles on my back. “Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it, don’t worry.”

But we couldn’t because this problem was too big for us. There was no money to pay off my father’s debt, and there was nowhere I could run where the Queen’s Men couldn’t find me. And even if I did, my father would still be taken to prison.

I was trapped.

And for once, Sirena wouldn’t understand. Hefter, after all, was the only man in the village she’d consider marrying. The one man who wasn’t madly in love with her.

“Tell me.” Her voice was low and soothing, as if I was a frightened animal.

I didn’t want to tell her, but I also couldn’t hide it. Sucking in air, I stood straighter, willing my panic down. “If I marry Hefter, Taris will pay off the debt. Otherwise, father will go to debtors’ prison.”

“Oh.” An uncomfortable silence hung between us. “But you don’t like Hefter, do you?”

“Not like that,” I answered quickly.

Her permanently wide blue eyes sought mine. “Would marrying him be so bad?”

I cringed, knowing my words would hurt. “For me, it would.”

The freckles on her pale skin grew darker. “But… why?”

It was too hard to explain. Hefter set me on edge. I sensed something cruel in him… the same thing I saw in his father. He’d never actually done anything malicious to me, yet the idea of marrying him sent every hair on my body standing on end.

“I don’t know, but I couldn’t.”

Her expression said she might argue, but her tone said differently. “And if they send your father away, they’ll take his lands. You’ll be left with nothing. Is that about it?”

“Yes,” I whispered, feeling hollow.

She turned her pain-filled gaze away from me. “All right, don’t say any more. You know the Queen’s Men can hear everything.” Her pause lasted a minute too long. “I guess that gives us an even bigger reason to be Chosen tonight.”

“Sirena, you don’t understand—”

“I understand. You want to find some miraculous way to save your father again. But I think it’s high time he lies in the bed he’s made.” She turned, daring me to argue with her. “Tonight all you should be

focusing on is the ceremony. Let your father find his way out of this."

I leaned against the wall. "He wouldn't survive the prisons. I'd be condemning my own father to death."

Sirena laughed. "He isn't some old man. He's tall and strong. Women watch him when he walks past. If anyone could survive the prisons, it's him. And some time to sober up might not be the worst thing." Her tone gentled as she studied me. "But he's also a smart man. I doubt it'd come to that."

My father *was* strong. I imagined he was quite a different man before my mother left us. But I had no memory of her. She'd abandoned us when I was just three years old.

"You might be right, but…" I hesitated. "Do you think I could pay off his debt if I became a Protector?"

She grabbed my shoulders, grinning. "Of course you could. You'd be rich and powerful! Even more powerful than the Queen's Men. " Her grin turned wicked. "Maybe they'd teach you how to turn Hefter's dad into a frog with just a wink of your eye, or make all his hair fall out with a flick of your wrist."

I returned her smile. "Can you even imagine?"

She let go of my shoulders and leaned on the wall beside me. "Tonight's the night, Rose. The night that could change the rest of our lives."

"But you know our chances are…" I stopped. There was no reason to finish. We both knew how rare it was to be selected.

"Our chances are just as good as anyone else."

I nibbled my bottom lip. No, my chances were just as good as most of the girls, because I didn't know anything about my mother's side of the family. Sirena, on the hand, had a much better prospect.

"At least your great-grandmother was a Protector," I said, trying to hide the envy in my voice.

She gave me a sympathetic look. "You don't know, maybe there was a Protector in your family line."

If not, I had no hope of being picked. Protectors didn't just need to have a Protector in their family line. The secret order of witches needed hidden magic. *Strong* hidden magic. A girl could easily develop magic later on in life, but she'd be nothing more than a weak witch, making simple potions to annoying ailments. An unpleasant future compared to that of the exciting lives of the women who kept our kingdom safe.

I wrinkled my nose. "Maybe."

She gave a sharp bark of laughter. "Don't look at me like that! There might not be another Protector in my family for the next ten generations. So the way I see it, we both have just as good a shot at getting picked."

That was something. I guess.

“Do you think it’s a good or bad sign The Protectors waited fifteen years to come back to our town?”

Sirena grinned. “Now that’s the topic on everyone’s minds.” She paced about, eyes flashing with excitement. “What kept them away for so long? And will there be fewer girls Chosen or more?”

I laughed nervously. “It’s quite the mystery.”

She whirled around dramatically. “One we’ll find the answer to tonight.” Glancing up, she squinted at the orange sun that was blazing its way towards the horizon. “We should go home and get ready.”

We set off down the road. People waved at Sirena, wishing her good luck, but avoided my gaze. It didn’t bother me. I’d long ago gotten used to the prejudice my looks had brought me. No one liked to see a daily reminder of their dangerous enemies.

“My mother had a special dress ordered. It’s bright yellow and trimmed with lace.”

“Sounds lovely.”

“And did you see my hair clip?” She reached up and touched where it lay nestled in the back of her golden hair.

The face of the Goddess of the Harvest, Demeter, stared back. Unlike her statues, the tiny barrett's beautiful face bore an unexpected smile. The carving had been crafted exquisitely, for even though the combination of dark brows and sharp cheekbones could’ve been stunning beyond words, just the sight of her face sent a familiar nervousness crawling along my skin. It was as if each item, designed in her likeness, allowed her to stare out at us.

“It’s… lovely.”

Sirena dropped her hand. “I thought it might bring me a little good luck.”

I wasn’t as superstitious as most of the villagers. They seemed to think the goddesses took an active interest in all of us. I was pretty sure they cared as much about us as we did ants. But in this case, Sirena might be right. The Goddess of the Harvest had been kind to us for the past few years. Had our crops not grown so well, our whole tiny farming-town would’ve long ago stopped being able to pay the queen’s taxes. What would Queen Gaudias have done then? Hang us all?

Probably. The heartless creature.

Unexpectedly, Sirena’s hand shot out and stopped me in my tracks. “Rose, what are you planning on wearing tonight?”

My heart raced as I glanced down at my dress. It was the better of the two I owned, but still, it was made of a scratchy, cheap wool. Time had faded the brown to an even duller shade, and numerous patches gave it the sad look of an old man who’d seen better days.

“You can’t wear that.” Sirena’s tone left no room for argument. “Come to my house. Wear one of my dresses.”

I stiffened. “Your dresses would be unseemly short on me. That’d be much worse than this old dress.”

Sirena frowned. “Still…”

“I’ll figure something out,” I promised.

She nodded, looking unconvinced.

We stopped in front of her parent’s bakery. The large doors were spread wide, releasing the scent of baking breads and pastries, no doubt in preparation for the celebration.

“Do you want me to walk you home?” Sirena asked, already taking a step towards the bakery.

I smiled. “No, I can make the trek alone.”

She surprised me by flinging herself into my arms. “Just think, this time tomorrow we could be far from this town. Exploring new places and living like royalty.”

I hugged her back. “I hope so.”

Releasing me, she grinned, then raced towards her house.

Watching her go, dread settled in my stomach. If the order of the Protectors didn’t choose me tonight, what would I do?

Rose

I WALKED without knowing where I was going. But somehow, my feet took me to the village shrine. The Goddess of the Harvest's shrine was by no means large or extravagant, not like in the big cities, but we were proud of it.

Climbing the three steps, I entered between the two pillars, and walked across the gray marble, towards Demia's statue. A dozen villagers could've prayed in this space with ease, but today it was thankfully empty. Well, technically not completely empty, but the only creatures present were the small fairies that played in the flowers surrounding the shrine.

And fairies knew how to keep secrets.

Falling to my knees, I stared at the statue. Demeter was an older goddess than most, although still looked to be in the prime of her life. With long, full hair cascading down her body, scrutinizing eyes, and the grim face of someone passing judgment, she was both lovely and terrifying.

Chests of offerings lined the walls behind her, no doubt filled with wealth enough to make all my problems vanish. And bring the wrath of the goddesses on me if I took a single item.

"Goddess…" I started, awkwardly. "Demeter." I paused again, not quite sure what to say. "It's Rose." Taking a deep breath, I just let the words fall out. "If I could be Chosen… well, I think I could make you proud."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Where had that come from? I doubted anyone had been proud of me in my life, so why should it matter now?

And yet, if I became a Protector, I'd be doing something amazing. My job would be to keep everyone in the kingdom of Tarak safe using magic. Who couldn't be proud of me then?

Immediately, I realized what a fool I'd been. I should've asked for

help. For money. For a way out of my looming marriage.

I opened my mouth, but only *thank you* tumbled out.

Feeling foolish beyond words, I rose and turned to leave.

A loud crash came from behind me.

I spun and stared, my heart pounding. Disappointment grew. I'd half expected to see the goddess herself standing behind me. Instead, a lid on one of the chests had come open.

Frowning, I climbed the steps, even knowing that only our town priest should touch the chests. But when I came close to it, I saw that it was empty. Closing it anyway, I hesitated, my hand on the lid. My father had chests similar to these, old and well-made. They were stacked in the loft, creating a hiding spot for my father's old sword.

Maybe I should search the chests back home? I knew they held my mother's things… items I'd searched without finding anything of interest. But now I needed a dress, and I knew she'd left at least that behind.

"Did you find what you came for?"

I spun.

Our town priest Ranter stood between the two pillars, with his typical serene expression. He was an old man, with spots like ink stains on his balding head.

I locked gazes with him, hoping he didn't think I was trying to steal. "Today seemed a good day to pray."

He smiled. "Every day is a good day to pray."

"But today especially," I blurted out.

His smile widened. "If you'd come earlier, you would have found many girls praying to be Chosen."

I laughed humorlessly. "I guess I'm not the only desperate one then."

Looking at the statue of the goddess, he spoke, as if to her. "When I was a young boy I thought that becoming an Oracle was the only way I could ever be happy. But when I realized the goddesses heard me no better than the average man, and that they refused to speak directly to me, I had to accept that I was meant for something else."

His words hit me like stones. "So whatever fate they've set out for us, we can't escape."

"I didn't say that." He softened his tone. "I just meant that it doesn't matter whether or not you're Chosen, you can still accomplish great things. Your life path may simply lead you elsewhere."

His words were exactly what I didn't want to hear.

Shifting, I looked down at my feet. "I should go get ready for the ceremony."

"Of course," he said, smoothing the fabric of his gray robes. "But remember, the goddesses can only answer you if you pray to them."

I nodded, even though I knew better than to believe such foolishness.

Climbing back down the stairs, I passed Demeter's smiling statue and Ranter, who watched me closely.

Then, I paused, realizing that if everything went right, this might be my last chance to speak to the kindly priest. "Thank you."

He tilted his head, his brows drawing together. "For what?"

I nibbled at my bottom lip, forming the words in my mind. "For teaching me to read and write. For not caring that I look like our enemies."

A smile touched his lips and brought a sparkle to his eyes. "No need to thank me. You were a wonderful and deserving student."

I doubted that, but I held my uncertainties inside. "I'm sorry you weren't able to be an Oracle, but you're a great priest."

He patted my shoulder. "Take comfort. The goddesses always have a plan."

My hope dwindled further. Did he know something I didn't?

We said our goodbyes before I headed outside. A slight gloom hung over me, but even still, I rushed along the road. If I took much longer I'd be late for the ceremony, and this was one thing I couldn't be late for, even without the goddess's blessing.

Rose

MY FATHER HAD BEEN silent all day, but not his usual silence. Instead, it was the intense feeling of words left unsaid clouding the air.

Stepping down our old wooden stairs and into our small kitchen, I found my father's head bowed over the table. In his hands, some new creation was being whittled with care. And resting on the table in front of him, as always, his thick mug of ale sat in its usual place of honor.

I smiled despite my nervousness.

"Oh, Rose. You look beautiful!" Sirena stood by the fire, her delicate hands clutching our rocking chair as she gazed at me. She wore a dress of a vibrant yellow, and her golden hair was braided intricately, encircling her head like a crown.

"So do you," I said, meaning it.

Her smile widened, but her question struck me like a blow to the chest, "Is that a new dress?"

My heart pounded as my father glanced up.

His eyes widened, and in a flash, he was standing. Behind him, the chair struck the dirt floor.

I'd expected him to be angry with me for going through my mother's things, even though they'd been nothing more than trinkets and clothes locked away in dust-covered chests. But what I hadn't expected was his fear. How could wearing her dress frighten him so?

My heart pounded in my chest. Was I like a ghost to him? An image of the woman he loved who abandoned him.

Not knowing what else to do, I stepped further into the room and into the light cast from the crackling fire in the hearth.

Sirena's gaze darted from me to him, and still, no one spoke. Tension sang through the room like unseen lightning.

At last, my father averted his gaze, picked up his chair, and sat down. His whittling lay forgotten upon the table.

Disappointment left a hollow ache in my chest. He was my father. Shouldn't *he* at least care that this might be our last evening together?

Of course not!

Anger flared inside of me. This was the same man who'd been too swallowed by his own emotions all these years to remember that even though he'd lost his wife, I'd lost my mother. To him, I was nothing more than a burden. Nothing more than a reminder of the woman who'd left him. I'd been naïve to think there was some small part of him that actually cared for me.

Feeling brave, I chose my words with care. "It would've been disrespectful to attend The Choosing in my tattered, stained gowns, so I found one of mother's dresses in an old chest."

Sirena gasped and stuttered. "O-Oh."

When my father remained silent, I ground my teeth, determined to make him talk. "I thought I might as well wear it since this might be my last day in the village."

The muscles in my father's strong chin clenched, and a familiar nervous anticipation rose as the firelight danced across the intricate pale scars covering his face and neck. Still, he said nothing.

Bitter disappointment bloomed, and I grabbed my dark green cloak from near the door and put it on. "We best hurry, or we'll be late."

"A word first."

We jumped at the rough sound of his whispered words.

Sirena's eyes widened. She'd only heard my father speak a handful of times.

But she quickly recovered from her shock. "Of course."

In an instant, she was out the door and hurrying away, in an attempt at giving us privacy. My nerves had me watching her descend the small hill, envying her unrestrained excitement as she leaped on the dirt road with the abandon of a small child. The deep orange and reds of the painted evening sky bathed her silhouette in its soft, almost mystical glow.

When her movement ceased, my breath caught in my chest as I willed myself to turn to face my father. We'd known about the Choosing for nearly a week, but during that time he'd said nothing to me. Not wishing me good luck, nor making a special effort to spend time with me. What words of wisdom or love did he suddenly feel the need to share?

A puff of warm breath, reeking of ale struck me just before he spoke. "Don't go."

His rough plea surprised me to my core. He wanted me to stay?

Tears rose against my will, so I closed my eyes, forcing them to remain inside. And at the same time, allowing me a moment to savor the unique sound of the two words that meant he actually cared. They

were deep, but broken, like any time he spoke. I was never sure if it was the result of his injury, or simply because he rarely used it, but I loved the sound all the same.

"Why shouldn't I go?" I pushed the words past the lump in my throat and opened my eyes to look at him. *Really* looked at him. His eyes were the same pale green as mine, his hair the same light brown, and yet, he'd treated me like nothing more than a stranger most of my life. "Is there any reason for me to stay?"

His face twisted as if I'd struck him, but his penetrating gaze was fixed on me. "I beg you not to go," he whispered, and his hand tightened on my arm. "I *beg* you."

Despite the years I'd spent dreaming of this day, despite the many prayers I'd made to be Chosen, I hesitated. Because, in truth, I'd give it all up if I thought he truly loved me, truly wanted me around.

Gripping the leather thong of my necklace, I chose my words carefully, "If you just told me why—"

My father released me, shoving me away from him and out the door. "I can't," he snarled, smashing his fist into the table. "I *can't*."

"Of course you *can't*!" I shouted back at him. "Not even today, when you might never see me again. You can't say you love me. You can't say you'll miss me."

"That's not important—" he rasped, clenching his fist and shaking it.

"No, nothing is. Nothing but your ale." I turned away. Hot tears gathered in my eyes. "And don't think, no matter what happens tonight, that I'll be able to square away your debt with the Queen's Men. It's your responsibility now."

He called after me, but I slammed the door on my name.

Rose

TEARING through the chilly evening air, I passed Sirena, who was waiting patiently. But I couldn't stop yet, not until I could conceal the grief threatening to overwhelm me. I ran towards the town, letting the cold rip at my exposed skin beneath my cloak until my lungs began to ache.

Pausing at the side of the road, I wrapped my arms around my stomach until the painful feeling inside of me eased. It didn't matter what my father had, or hadn't, said. Tonight might present my opportunity to leave him and this village behind. I wouldn't let anyone take that chance away from me.

"Rose!" Sirena called, running along the road behind me.

Releasing my stomach, I took a deep breath, easing the tightness in my chest. I might not have a father who loved me, but I had the greatest friend a girl could ask for.

"I'm sorry," I said, as she stopped beside me.

"It's— okay." She gasped for breath.

"He asked me not to come tonight," I blurted.

Her large eyes widened. "*Not to come*? But, it's the law." I tried to interrupt, but she continued in disbelief. "And besides, who wouldn't want this chance for a better life?"

I shook my head. "He probably just wanted to hurt me. To ruin this day."

My necklace warmed at my throat, and I clutched the leather thong. Usually, it warmed when danger was near, but perhaps this time, it was to reassure me. Because even though it was the only gift my father had ever given me, I suspected it'd been my mother's. And maybe, just maybe, she felt similar fears when she ran away… leaving him. And me.

Sirena's eyes filled with pity. "Don't let him spoil this. I mean it. No girl should have this day ruined." She hesitated, her mouth lifting

in an attempt at a smile. “Today you might be a farmer’s daughter, but tomorrow you could be a Protector. Rich, powerful, responsible for keeping the kingdom safe. Just focus on that.”

I went to answer, to tell her about the look on my father’s face. To explain the uncertainty he’d planted in my mind, but the sound of drums beating interrupted the normal sounds of the night. The ceremony would begin soon.

We both exchanged a look of pure excitement, my doubts rushing away as hope blossomed again.

She reached out, and I gave her my hand, just like we’d done as small girls. It was a way we reassured each other in the hardest of times, how we silently gave each other strength. For some reason, such a simple thing always made me feel less alone.

Sirena tugged on my hand, shaking me from my thoughts. I smiled knowing we could face anything together, and we ran. She as fast as her shorter legs could carry her, and me, fast enough to leave me winded.

A few minutes later we reached the edge of the town, just as the last streaks of sunlight disappeared over the horizon. There, we paused to catch our breath.

“Are you ready for this?” Sirena nearly bounced with anticipation.

I didn’t answer right away. If it was up to me, I would’ve held the ceremony in private, away from the prying eyes of the villagers. In front of them all, it’d be hard not to imagine what they were thinking. Would they hope I’d be Chosen to finally be rid of me? Or would it anger them that someone they despised so could be selected over their daughters?

As much as I loved Sirena, she couldn’t possibly understand my hesitation. She was beloved by the villagers. And what was more, she loved to be the center of attention.

“Ready to be assaulted by everyone in the village?” I said, trying my best to give my words a jesting air. “No, I guess for some crazy reason I’m not.”

Her mouth twisted into a false pout. “Out of all the nights, shouldn’t we enjoy this one the most?” She hesitated, her pout disappearing, and her gaze lowering to the ground in an unexpected expression of worry. “After all, tonight might be our last night in the village.”

I reached out, brushing a strand of her perfect blonde hair back from her freckled face. “You’ll be Chosen, don’t worry.”

She looked up at me, her blue eyes round. “And what if I’m not?”

I’d asked myself the same question many times, but no answer ever came that could erase the doubt building inside of me.

“If it’s based on beauty, you have nothing to worry about.”

Her worried expression faded, replaced by her usual cocky grin. “Most Protectors *are* beautiful.” Then, she added quickly. “But you’re beautiful too.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say—”

“No,” she forced a smile. “You are. You just look like…” She clamped her mouth shut, but she didn’t have to finish her thought.

I looked like a Northern. The people who Tarak had once enslaved. The people who, now free, spent their time causing unrest in the northern part of the kingdom. Our dangerous enemies, who were technically our own people. Until, of course, they declared their independence and an all-out war broke out once more.

“Well,” Sirena said, breaking through my thoughts. “I don’t care what the others think. You might look different from the rest of us, but you’re beautiful to me.”

I always felt bad for her when she tried to make such ridiculous statements because only a true friend could believe something so obviously wrong.

Forcing a smile, I tried to hide my dark thoughts behind a teasing tone. “But you have the most offers of marriage.”

She laughed, pushing me gently. “I might have the most offers, but you’re practically married already.”

My smile vanished. “We should hurry.”

Silence stretched between us.

“I’m sorry, Rose. That was stupid of me to say. I just…”

I shrugged, and we continued walking into the village, past the quiet houses, to where shops lined the way to the bustling town square. Even the attention we’d receive in the village was better than discussing Hefter.

“Rose!”

Turning, I spotted Gager the Blacksmith standing outside his shop. He was covered in his normal layer of sweat and filth, but there was something in his expression that made me feel uneasy.

My necklace warmed again, and I looked down at where it was concealed in the front of my dress. What was going on with it? Was it trying to put a damper on my spirits too?

“Good luck tonight.”

I jumped a little. Gager had soundlessly come to stand in front of me.

Very slowly, I looked up to meet his gaze as I let his words settle in. *Good luck* had been said to the young girls of the village more times than I could count over the past week, but never in the way Gager said it. There was nothing celebratory or excited about his tone; instead, it was like a warning.

“Thank you.”

Sirena slid closer, almost between us. “I’ll be in The Choosing too.”

Most people smiled when Sirena spoke. They didn’t just tolerate her arrogance; they seemed not to notice it, as if her angelic looks blinded them to her words. But today Gager didn’t smile the way most people did or speak words of encouragement. Instead, he crossed his muscular arms against his chest.

“Of course you’ll be. You’re required by law.” His gaze flicked between the two of us. “Your sixteen right? And Rose is eighteen?”

Sirena either ignored the anger in his voice or was too excited to notice. “Yes, and how old is Yara? She should be thirteen soon, right?”

“No, of course not!” Gager looked furious for one shocking second before his arms dropped to his sides. An expression of defeat marred his strong features, and I longed to ask him why.

No, perhaps I already knew.

The last Choosing had been fifteen years ago when I’d been only three years old. I remembered nothing of that day, or anything of the year I’d lost my mother. Not even a distant memory of a sound or scent. But what I did know, another Choosing hadn’t happened since.

Year after year girls had waited, hoping in vain, for The Protectors to return. Many nineteenth birthdays had been met with tears, as girls mourned the loss of such a potential life of wealth and power. But most fathers, and even a few mothers, met such tears with barely concealed delight. They could rest easy, knowing their daughters would never be taken from them.

Such selfish parents.

I tilted my head, wishing I could read Gager’s thoughts. His love for his daughter had been something I’d envied. Could he be so selfish as to hope his daughter never had a chance at such a life?

The pace of the drums suddenly increased, breaking through my thoughts.

“We best get to the village square. Sirena wants to dance with all the boys before the ceremony.”

He nodded, suddenly looking very old.

I started to turn away, but he caught me in an unexpected hug.

“Run.” He whispered the word, his breath heavy and hot in my ear. “Now. Just run. They might never find you.”

I tried to pull away, but he held me tighter.

“Your father already lost your mother. Don’t make him endure losing you… not to them. Not again.”

I jerked my head back. “Wait, was my mother—“

“Shush.”

I followed his gaze to the tavern across the street. One of the Queen’s Men, in his obnoxious shimmering blue and lavender uniform, watched us.

“But why should they care if—?”

His mouth moved to my ear again. “We’re forbidden from talking about her, on penalty of death. And they hear all.” His words held me enthralled. “I risk a lot in warning you.” Another pause. “I’m only surprised your father didn’t…”

He released me. “May the goddesses be with you.”

Sirena frowned, stepping in front of me, “and you.” Then, in an unexpected display of protectiveness, she took my hand and led me away. All the while, regarding Gager with open suspicion.

Rose

MY THOUGHTS SWIRLED. What could have caused him to say such a thing to me? My mother couldn't have been chosen by The Protectors. If she had been, people would simply say so. Not avoid the topic as if…

I felt as if cold water stung my face. Maybe people never spoke of her because they were forbidden from doing so. Maybe even my father.

Without wanting to, I looked back. Gager's young daughter Yara stood in the doorway of the blacksmith shop, watching him approach. Pride filled her gaze. When he reached her, he rubbed the top of her head.

My chest ached in a familiar empty spot.

That couldn't be the reason for the wide bridge between my father and myself. Words weren't the only way a father showed his love. Whatever reason Gager had for his warning, I needed to ignore it. His false belief that my father would miss me was not enough to give up on my dream.

"You all right?" Sirena asked.

I turned to find her watching me, a hint of anger crinkling the edges of her eyes.

Any other day, I'd tell her how it hurt. To be without a mother. And to have an unexplainable distance between my father and myself, but not today. Not on the day we'd waited all our lives for.

"Yes. I'm fine."

One brow rose in doubt.

"Let's just keep going." My mind searched for something to distract her. The drumming that had become background noise drew my attention. "You did want to enjoy the music and dancing before The Protectors come, right?"

Excitement bloomed in her eyes. "All right, but first…"

Without warning, she was brushing back my hair, running her careful hands through the unruly strands. I took a deep breath. She was braiding my hair, in one of her clever ways that left me looking like a wealthy merchant's daughter. And at the same time, her gentle fingers were washing away some of my tension.

"There." She turned me around and smiled. "You have such lovely eyes, but no one notices how green they are, or the little specks of gold, with your hair always in your face."

I didn't tell her how much I tried to hide my green eyes because she wouldn't understand. To me, all they did was mark me as different from the village of blonde-haired, blue or brown-eyed people. To her, hiding them went against everything her mother had taught her, on how to emphasize a person's loveliest features. In Sirena's opinion, drawing attention to my eyes took away from my almost manly height and strength.

Locking eyes with Sirena, I tried to force cheer into my voice. "Thanks."

Her smile widened. "Now we're ready."

We hurried toward the town square. Peering with curious eyes, we slowed our steps as we passed the town hall. The older women gathered there, decorating and cooking for the celebration. But we didn't pause until we reached the edge of the busy town square, where the drummers beat an exciting rhythm.

"I don't want to forget a single moment of tonight," Sirena whispered, taking my hand.

I stared down at our entwined fingers. She was like a sister to me. We could face anything as long as we were together. But tonight we might be separated forever.

"You go ahead. I just need a minute to get my thoughts together." I tugged my hand free of hers.

She frowned in disapproval. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

To my astonishment, she hugged me. "Don't look at me like that," she whispered, squeezing me harder. "We'll be together forever. No matter what."

She released me, giving a reassuring smile, before darting into the brightly lit village square. The sea of short, blonde-haired people in festive colors separated to accept her. Before she'd reached the platform in the center, the crowd had swallowed her. I caught flashes of her dazzling yellow dress amongst the people, dancing without reserve to the drummers' rhythm.

A few people spotted me, shouting their *good lucks* and complimenting my dress and hair. To my complete surprise.

On the outskirts of the young people were the more somber adults.

Their hair and clothes spoke of a great celebration, but their silence said otherwise.

This was my first Choosing, but the tension in the adults felt out of place. It was a celebration after all. Right?

"Rose!" Clint stopped a short distance from me. His blond hair had been slicked back, concealing his normally untamable mane of hair. "Hefter wants to talk with you." He pointed.

Turning, I stared at the five drummers, forming a slightly uneven line not far from us. Hefter was among them, beating slow rhythmic sounds into his drum. His face appeared serious beneath the flickering torchlight as he gazed at me.

"He's pretty nervous about tonight." Clint gave an apologetic shrug, and left, weaving back into the crowd of dancers.

I walked slowly towards Hefter, trying to keep my nerves hidden behind a calm expression. Did he even know about his father's plans? Hopefully not. Hefter was many things, but I doubted he was a man who'd willingly force me into marriage.

His gaze followed my path. "You look beautiful."

The compliment made me cringe. "Thank you." I stared at his hands as they pounded on the drums. "You're a drummer?"

"Yes. They told us yesterday, but I wanted to keep it a surprise," he answered proudly. "We five were the only ones picked. It's a great honor, especially considering how long it's been since the last Choosing."

"A great honor," I repeated, not sure what else to say.

"I know everyone is pretty excited about today, but in truth, I haven't looked forward to it."

I tore my gaze from his hands to his dull brown eyes, as they stared meaningfully into mine. What could I say? If I was honest about how badly I wanted to be selected tonight, and wasn't, life could become very difficult for me and my father. I wondered, as I had many times before, if Hefter had the same cruel streak as his father.

In an instant, I decided to keep my true feelings to myself. He didn't need to know that I wanted to become a witch and join The Protectors. It was too dangerous for me if that information made him angry.

"I'm looking forward to the feast too," I said, forcing a small smile as I carefully avoided actually discussing The Choosing.

Relief flooded his face, and he missed a beat on his drum. "I'm glad. I mean. I thought you'd turn nineteen soon, and then, we'd know you wouldn't be picked. I didn't want it to be like my mom. Getting married. Having me, and then being Chosen. I didn't want my kids to lose their mother. But then the witches surprised us with this..."

My jaw dropped ever so slightly. His words were surprisingly…

sweet and sincere.

"Rose." The serious way he spoke my name had my guard up once more. "I had an interesting conversation with my father…"

"Oh?"

His eyes narrowed. "You should've told me you were behind on your taxes."

"My *father's* taxes—"

"Regardless," he interrupted. "The queen is taking such acts very seriously." He paused, uncertainty flickering across his face. "You know Wilson?"

Of course. I knew everyone in this town, including Wilson, one of my father's drinking buddies who made my skin crawl every time he looked at me. "What about him?"

"He was behind in his taxes…"

"And The Queen's Men beat him."

I remembered the day. The memory was unforgettable. Never in my life had I seen someone beaten into an unrecognizable shape, swollen, bruised, and bleeding. We'd all been sure he'd die.

"Well," Hefter squared his shoulders. "They're going to hang him."

My throat closed. "Hang him," I repeated, wheezing out the words.

He nodded. "Paying taxes is every subject's duty to their queen."

It took me a second to understand his words. "You think he deserves to die? Over taxes?"

"Of course."

The heartlessness of his words erased any doubt I had about the influence of his parentage. Anger tinged my words, "Every year taxes increase. What are they even being used for? People are nearly starving to death just to pay them! How is that fair?"

His eyes were as hard as steel. "The queen has to fund the war with The Northerners. And there are other problems—"

"The centaurs say our lands are cursed. Wood Elves won't speak to us anymore." I took a deep breath. "We didn't have these problems when King Zander ruled."

He stopped drumming and leaned towards me. "What do you even know about that?"

"What? You think because the queen murdered the whole royal family and usurped the throne *before* I was born, I wouldn't know about the most peaceful time in Tarak's history?"

His expression darkened, danger looming in his eyes. "What you speak of is treason. Don't test me, Rose. I may love you, but even I can't tolerate such talk."

We stood in silence, unspoken anger crashing between us.

"Sometimes I wish I'd never seen you," he said, glancing over my head at the dancers. "You're impossibly beautiful. Like a siren. Or a

goddess." His gaze swept to my face. "Your eyes steal my breath every time I look at them. I've never seen that shade before. Blue, green, pale brown, and gold blending together in such perfection."

His unexpected compliments did nothing to cool my anger. "Is that why you want to marry me?"

"Well," his brows drew together. "Of course." He tilted his head, eying me in disbelief. "It certainly isn't for your ridiculous beliefs. Those will require a lot of work to un-teach."

"And what if I don't want to be *untaught*? What if I don't want to marry you at all?"

He leaned uncomfortably close to me. "It sounds like with your debt, you really don't have a choice."

I reared back, glaring at him. "I'd rather die."

Turning, I started to storm away, but his words stopped me. "Don't be a fool, Rose. Poor, uninteresting farm girls aren't selected to be Protectors." Humor filled his voice. "Tomorrow you'll come back to me, begging me for forgiveness, and the goddesses know I'll forgive you. Father always said women were ruled by their emotions, after all."

My throat closed. Anger built beneath my flesh, blazing my skin. If I spoke now, I had no idea what wretched things would come spilling out.

So I walked away.

7

Rose

SIRENA APPEARED in front of me, fear flickering across her expression. “Are you all right?”

I nodded.

She didn’t look convinced. “Well, the other girls are lining up.”

Following Sirena, I walked up the few stairs of the platform without noticing much but paused when I reached the top. Seven girls were waiting, dressed in their best clothing. Shifting and giggling, their expressions were an expected mix of nervous and overjoyed.

My necklace warmed again at my throat, surprising me and distracting me from my anger. Frowning, I turned to scan the crowd. What danger was I missing?

Reaching beneath the fabric of my dress, I touched the sharp edge of the shard. *I’m fine.* I told it, as if it were an overly cautious child, tugging at my leg. It sent a soft hum through my body and grew cold.

There, that should keep it quiet for a while. I had no idea what had gotten into it.

Still, I glanced at the crowd again.

At first, there didn’t seem to be a single friendly face to be found, but then I saw Sirena’s parents at the edge of the crowd, and some of my fears ebbed. They waved. I waved back.

Not far from them, Gager watched me.

I quickly looked away.

My eyes fell on Witch Bryn and Witch Sofia as they stared up emotionlessly. They were the two most powerful witches in our town, and Witch Sofia had once been my friend. She was quite a bit older than me but had always been kind.

I’m sure the other girls felt sorry for them. Usually, girls with magic were taken by The Protectors, while girls with minor powers often got left behind. But fifteen years without a Choosing had consequences, and these two women were it.

What must it be like to know that you had the gift, but were forgotten, or simply found unworthy of being selected? Would I know soon?

Sirena pulled my hand, shaking me from my thoughts, and led me to a place in line I wished I could have avoided. We squeezed in-between Pollie and Bethenny. Pollie cried about everything. Just as she was already doing, in loud obnoxious bursts. Bethenny, on the other hand, was much worse. She'd long ago proven herself to be a master of the kind of cruelty only a woman could use. With a sweet smile, she'd deliver a blow so painful and slow it took your breath away.

"Who do you think they'll pick?" Sirena whispered.

I turned to study my friend. Was there uncertainty in her voice? She was paler than usual. Light from the torches made her freckles appear darker across her face.

"Only they know for sure," I said, pushing back a strand of hair.

"But we *need* to be Chosen."

Without thinking, I took her hand.

She stiffened. But after a moment, her hand squeezed mine.

"What's this?" Bethenny sneered, leaning to stare at us. "I'm surprised you girls even bothered to dress up tonight, seeing as you'll never be selected."

Narrowing my eyes, I took a step towards her, only Sirena's hand tightening around mine held me back.

"Let it go. She's not worth the trouble."

But, of course, I couldn't. "Money might buy you pretty clothes, and maybe even a handsome husband, but it can't buy you a place among The Protectors."

Bethenny took a step towards me. "No one *bought* me a husband."

I flashed her my best condescending smile. "Well. He certainly wasn't won by your looks or charm."

Pushing back a lock of reddish-blonde hair, she took a steadying breath. Her voice came out cold and threatening. "One day you'll regret this." She moved to her place in line, glaring out at the star-speckled sky.

I grinned and allowed Sirena to move me back in line. But soon, my mind drifted back to my father, and our unfinished conversation. I clutched at the cord around my neck, willing myself to stay focused and strong.

A chill wind blew, shaking me from my thoughts, and I dropped my hand. A few of the torches near us went out. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Something unseen, beyond the chill of the air, had changed, but I wasn't sure what.

And then, I saw them.

Three dark shapes moved towards us.

The drums stopped, and Sirena gripped my arm. A nervous murmur ran through the crowd. Against my chest, the shard of stone grew warm.

It was time. The Protectors were here.

Rose

THE DARK TRIO became women who moved with fluidity, separating the crowd. I couldn't see their faces, but the stories surrounding them had been told so many times that the scene before me felt familiar.

When they reached us, the leader removed her hood, and a collective gasp rose in the air. She was beautiful, like the river on a dark night, with long black hair, large gray eyes, and an intense face. Something the old priest had once told me echoed in my thoughts, *beauty can be deceiving.*

"Greetings people of Druggery," she said. Her voice was deeper than expected. No word or sound was emphasized, yet each word was spoken carefully. "We all know why we are here, and yet, one of you is missing." She turned to the crowd, and her gaze fell on Gager the Blacksmith.

He frowned, and I caught my breath. His daughter Yara peered out from behind him. Was she really thirteen already?

The strange woman tilted her head. "Bring her forward."

No one moved.

Raising her long-fingered hand, she motioned in the air. A second later, Yara was gone.

"What have you done with my daughter?' Gager shouted, but the woman turned away from him. "If you even try to—"

In mid-sentence, he too disappeared.

Unthinking, I stepped forward, coming closer to the woman. The sound of a girl crying froze me before I could think about what I planned to do. Turning, I discovered Yara was now on stage, at the end of the row. Her dark eyes were flooded with tears as she searched wildly for her father.

"Not to worry," the woman said, her tone lacking any reassurance. "Your father is back home, where his emotions will not interfere with what is best for his daughter."

Her words were meant for Yara, but she stared at me.

Meeting her gaze, I straightened my spine. There was no reason to challenge the woman who could be my savior, yet I couldn't seem to back down. For one long moment, our gazes locked in an unspoken battle. Then, I looked away and stepped back into line.

"Let us begin," the woman said, raising her voice as she turned back to the crowd. "In the time before written histories, it is said a day came when the goddesses wanted to reward some of their humans. Women and men were gathered from around the world. No one knows exactly why these specific people were chosen, but ancient stories suggest that they were special. Intelligent, beautiful, and creative on extraordinary levels."

"And so, the goddesses bestowed upon these individuals unique powers, as well as, life spans beyond the average human. These people became known as witches and wizards." She paused, her gaze scanning the silent crowd. "For a short time, these gifted beings created a better world for mankind. But alas, it was not meant to last."

A nervous murmur ran through the crowd. She said no more, waiting until there was silence.

"As the mothers passed their powers down to their daughters, and the fathers passed their powers down to their sons, it became clear that the men were somehow corrupted by magic. Many dark days followed as the wizards used their gifts to kill and harm." Her expression grew grave. "Mankind prayed to the heavens to free them from the cruelty of the wizards, but the goddesses ignored their prayers."

The woman looked back at her companions. One of them stepped forward, but her hood remained pulled low over her face, concealing her entirely from view. A moment later, her husky, heavily accented voice poured out of her like a mind-altering haze. "The most powerful witches gathered together to create The Protectors, an order of witches responsible for defending the world from the wizards. But time passed. Rulers came and went. Queen Guadias became the ruler of Tarak and brought The Protectors together to serve her. Through the queen's wisdom, she removed the threat of the wizards, once and for all."

Her speech was nowhere near as elegant, and yet the exotic nature of her voice held us enthralled. The cloaked woman turned, with movements as graceful as a dance, and returned to her place far behind her dark-haired leader.

"Since then," the first woman continued, "The Protectors have served Queen Gaudias, keeping the kingdom safe for all the citizens of Tarak."

She paused and silence followed her words for a second too long

before the spell was broken. Cheering rose from the crowd, rolling through the townsfolk until The Protector raised her hand for silence.

The woman turned her back on the crowd, her silver gaze sliding over us. “The Choosing is a chance at a new life, perhaps for many of you, perhaps for none. Yet to stand on this stage is in honor in itself. It means that you are being considered to join the most powerful women in the world. And more than that, it means you might get a chance to serve the kingdom that has raised and sheltered you for so long.”

Her chin tilted higher, and she gazed at us down her nose. “It has been some time since last we visited you, but the process is the same. If you are Chosen, you will come with us and join The Protectors of Tarak, where you will live out your days in happiness and luxury. It is both a great honor and a great responsibility. Leaving the life you know and the people you love can be difficult, but even if you have reservations, know this is the right choice, the only choice, for those of you blessed enough to be Chosen.”

Her words settled on us, and the excitement in the girls beside me rose. I wanted to share in their delight, but the rapid pounding of my heart left me breathless and lightheaded, a feeling nowhere near delightful. Something felt off about these women, but if I wasn’t selected tonight… no, I couldn’t think about that.

The woman stopped at each girl, reaching out and laying her hands on each of their heads as she asked their names. To the villagers, it likely seemed an insignificant exchange, but I could sense the overwhelming magic stretching out from the woman like the flames of a fire. Warmth radiated from her, chasing away even a trace of the cool autumn night.

It was like nothing I’d experienced before, both fascinating and terrifying all at once. What would it be like to have power such as hers? And what was she using it for?

Sirena didn’t seem to notice. She dropped her hand from my arm as the woman approached us, no trace of anything but anxiety and excitement.

“I’m Sirena Galager,” she said, too eagerly, and then the woman stood before me.

Reaching out, she set her hands on my head. The warmth that licked my flesh was almost uncomfortably warm. Sometimes when I saw the witches in our town use magic, I felt it like a warm breeze. It’d never meant much to me then, but now it seemed significant. Could all the girls sense magic like I could? And what was this woman doing to us? This was stronger magic than anything I’d felt before, and it felt strangely evasive.

“And what’s your name?” she asked after a moment of silence.

Heat poured in greater intensity from her hands into my body. I

wanted to ignore the uncomfortable feeling, but it was as if I could sense her prying into me, trying to uncover my secrets kept deep inside. The sensation left me agitated.

I opened my mouth, not knowing how I'd answer her question. "It's customary for you to give your name first."

The moment the words left my mouth I wanted to snatch them back, even though they were true. Was I being discourteous on purpose? What was wrong with me?

For the second time, the woman's sharp gaze focused on me. But to my surprise, she smiled and leaned towards me. "You're a smart girl. People often forget that names have a great deal of power… in the wrong hands." Her breath smelled like spiced wine and my head spun. "My name is Blair Darkwater. And you are?"

"Rose," I answered.

The woman nodded. "Pleasure to meet you Rosalyn Vidoryn."

She moved away from me, her smile disappearing like a trick of the light, but something in her movements told me she was pleased with herself. The spinning in my head stopped, and it donned on me that she'd spoken my full name. My *real* name. It wasn't accented correctly, so she didn't know my *True Name*, the one that could be used against me, but she'd already known who I was. So why ask? Why the game? And more importantly, how did she know my name?

As she asked the other girls' names, I felt sure I'd been fooled.

People often gave their full names to each other, but never gave their *True Names*. Each person had a True Name. Usually, it was the name given to them by their parents. But more than that, the name needed to be spoken, emphasized, in exactly the same way as their parents had, on the day they were named.

For the average person, it was difficult to repeat a name precisely the way another did. Yet, people with magic in their blood often did so with ease, which was why most people didn't give more than their first name to magic-blooded people.

So why did these girls give their full names so easily? And why hadn't I? Was I trying to be rejected for my father's sake? Or, was I simply struggling to think clearly with my instincts screaming *run*?

A stillness shook me from my thoughts. The last girl had given her name, and it seemed everyone held their breaths at once, waiting.

"We have made our decision," Blair said, voicing the decision we'd waited all our lives to hear. "Sirena, Bethenny, Yara…"

Then, she hesitated.

And my heart stopped.

Rose

MY STOMACH DROPPED. The world around me slowed. This woman would decide my fate. She held it in her hands like a newborn bird. Marriage to Hefter, returning to my father, and living my days in my childhood town. Or... the unknown.

Turning, her eyes locked with mine. “And Rose. You are *ours*.”

Her words sealed my fate as an explosion of cheering rose from the crowd.

I stood in shocked silence, my arms hanging numbly at my sides. Was it really over?

Sirena hugged my stiff form. “It actually happened. Can you believe it?”

I tried to return her hug, but my arms refused to obey.

The cheering became a frenzy of sound.

The unchosen girls left the stage, most weeping.

Without knowing what I was doing, I scanned the crowd until I saw a familiar face. Hefter’s jaw hung open stupidly, bringing me more pleasure than I ever imagined. What would he and his father do now? I’d send money home, enough to keep my father safe from their clutches for life, and leave this town, free of guilt.

A smile touched my lips as I thought of the tiny statue of Athena. *Who lost now?*

The three girls drew closer to me, all but Yara smiling.

The crowd grew silent once more and Blair continued, “The Choosing is complete, and we wish you—“

Her word was cut off.

The crowd erupted into strangled screams.

Blair turned towards us, an arrow protruding from her chest.

The nightmarish sight drained the blood from my face.

Her hands rose above her head, her dark brows drawn in surprise. Her companions advanced towards her, but she motioned for them to

remain where they were with a flick of her wrist.

Her lips pulled into a thin line. When she spoke, her words were seething with rage. “Vidoryn. It has been a long time.”

I stepped away, shaking my head. It wasn’t me, how could it be? But following her gaze, I spotted my father standing at the edge of the crowd, a bow and arrow in his hands.

“You won’t take my daughter!” he shouted hoarsely.

He let loose another arrow, striking her in the shoulder. Another frantic cry erupted from the crowd. Yara fainted beside me, but I gave her little heed. Dark red splotches of blood appeared on the white dress beneath Blair’s cloak. The sight was both horrifying and mesmerizing.

Blair’s face twisted like pieces of a puzzle rearranging until a dangerous smile transformed her features. She reached down and yanked the first arrow from her chest. Blood spurted, but she ignored it, grasping and jerking the second arrow from her shoulder. Both arrows fell to the platform where dark blood decorated its surface like paint.

My father reached for another arrow.

“Oh, *Vidoryn*,” she said his name with a purr. “You should know better by now. Just as we took your wife, so shall we take your daughter.”

“Father, please.” I took a step closer to him.

I didn’t know what I would say, or what I wanted, but my heart twisted in my chest. This wasn’t how I imagined this day. In my dreams, gold dust seemed to illuminate everything in a beautiful light, and I awoke feeling warm and safe. Wanting the ceremony to come more than I’d wanted anything else in my life.

But this was not my dream. It was a nightmare.

“Father!” I shouted, panicked as he notched his arrow.

My father’s gaze faltered at the sound of my voice and shifted to me. Misery filled his eyes, adding to my heartache. I reached for him, but a dark wind rose, whirling around us. I caught the sound of what could have been my name before we were swallowed by it.

My breath tore from my chest. The village square blurred and faded, leaving only grays and blacks swirling. Screams of terror filled the air, some coming from my own lips. My feet touched nothing, and yet, I remained standing. A primal urge to fight or run coursed through my veins, and I almost gave in to it, before the rushing air slowed then disappeared.

We were in the woods not far from our village, the old shrine towering over us. Blair watched us silently, as if waiting for our reaction to what she’d just done and what had just happened. Her companions remained hidden beneath their dark hoods. But I could

feel their eyes on me, trying to peer beneath my exterior to find my secrets hidden deep inside, just as Blair had done with her magic.

My gaze snapped around us as I tried to process everything. What had just happened? They'd teleported us here with strange magic? I'd never imagined such a thing could be possible. And no doubt this was just the beginning…

And then there was the fact that my father had attacked a Protector. It was the worst of crimes. What was more, the arrows didn't even seem to hurt Blair. I'd seen them strike her. I'd seen the blood. Yet, she stood here with all of us like nothing had happened.

It was insane. It was impossible.

I trembled but forced myself to remain calm. Being Chosen was my dream. Perhaps things weren't going *exactly* the way I imagined they would, but nothing in life ever went according to plans. At least, that's what I told myself as I practiced breathing slower and tried to push away thoughts of the rushing wind, the blood, and my father.

It helped to calm me down enough so that I realized the other women around me were just as frightened as I was. Leaning down, I tried to help lift Yara from the ground where she lay, but she was just a heavy weight I couldn't quite lift.

"Stand up," I whispered.

When she didn't respond, I looked down at her face. Her eyes were open, but she didn't even blink. She just stared off as if she was somewhere else far away and only her body remained here with us.

"Help me with her," I ordered the others, even though I was shaking.

None of them moved.

Beside me, Sirena made a strangled sound, which unleashed heart-wrenching sobs that shook her small frame. My fear vanished, and my protective instincts flared to life. They had no right to frighten my friend with their strange magic. I'd thought Blair could simply send my father away, like she had with the blacksmith. Was the rushing wind and being dumped into a dark forest really necessary?

Realizing that I couldn't help Yara, I stood, squaring my shoulders and preparing for battle.

"What's this all about?" I demanded, stepping towards the women. "Isn't it supposed to be a good thing to be Chosen? Wasn't there a way to deal with my father and make sure this was all still a special ceremony for everyone instead of whatever scary thing *that* was?"

Blair looked to one of her companions who removed her black hood.

My heart stopped.

The rays of the moon caressed the remarkable woman. Her hair was so blonde it was nearly white. It was cut close to her head, almost

like a boy's, but somehow made her feminine face even more delicate. Her blue eyes glistened, almost as if she'd been crying, and a strange ache to reassure her filled me.

"I'm so sorry, girls," she said, her voice so quiet and musical, like the beginning of an epic love song. "Being Chosen is such a blessing." She let her head fall as her hands rose, as if in prayer. "It's usually a time of celebration. But some parents would rather keep their daughters all to themselves than allow them the happiness that comes from being Chosen. It happens sometimes, not often, but it does."

Bethenny spoke from behind me. "Of course *those* two would cause trouble," she said, referring to Yara and me. "I think you might've made a mistake when you chose them."

My hand clenched. What would the witches do if I smacked Bethenny?

The blonde laughed, a sound like the jingling of bells. "We're never mistaken. They're meant to be with us. And as much as we regret upsetting their fathers, it had to be done."

Happiness and warmth radiated from the blonde woman. My tension eased away. A soft blanket seemed to wrap around me, begging me to enter it, to forget all my worries and embrace the situation and these women. Yara rose from her stupor. Sirena's tears stopped. These new sensations, and my friend's improving spirits, should've put me more at ease, but somehow made my temples ache.

"Perhaps," I answered, drawing the attention of the blue-eyed beauty. "It's smart you don't allow parents to interfere."

Her rosy lips twisted into a smile, and she moved towards me with her pleading hands.

My heart raced, my body reacted, and I took a step back.

She froze.

"*But*," I emphasized the word. "What if *we* were to decide not to go?"

I don't know why I said it. I don't know I find it hard to trust these women. This was my way out of a horrible life. Wasn't it? Why in the world couldn't I just shut up?

And why did I need to know we were allowed to walk away? Deep inside I realized it was because I didn't want to be trapped in my own life, with Hefter, or with the witches. I just wanted the freedom to choose for myself. And if I was going along with someone else who wanted to own me, was it really any better?

The woman jerked back, and again the foreign need to reassure her at any cost rose. "Do you truly wish not to join our order?" she asked, sorrow turning her lips down.

"No," the automatic denial sprang free before I could stop it, "I mean, I'm not sure."

The blonde opened her mouth as if to argue, but Blair interrupted. “If you don’t wish to join, this is your chance to say so.” Our eyes locked. “But, I’m surprised to learn you’d refuse to follow in your mother’s footsteps.”

My chest tightened. “You knew my mother?”

Was she truly a Protector? Had the blacksmith been right?

Blair raised her hands covered in blood. “I don’t have time for this, so make your choice.”

I stared in shock.

“My choice?”

“Tell us now whether you want to be a Protector or not. This is it, Rose. Decide.”

Rose

SOMETHING I'D NEVER ALLOWED to happen, happened all at once. My future seemed to open in front of me. I didn't have to marry a boy I didn't like or be burdened by my father's mistakes. Instead, I would have everything I ever imagined. I just had to take a leap of faith. I just had to stop thinking that everything would end badly, just because that's how my life had been so far.

I could write my own future, just like my mother had apparently done the day she was Chosen. What was more, I could finally learn about the woman who had brought me into this world and then walked away.

The decision was easy.

"Let's go," I said, confident in my decision.

Blair turned to the shrine, a white arch covered in flowers so red only magic could've crafted them, and began to repeat the name of the Goddess of Travel and Journeys. "*Abeona*, *Abeona*, *Abeona*…"

She chanted over and over, and I closed my eyes, listening to the way she spoke the goddess's name. Each syllable was emphasized differently, given a different note. It was a song, a prayer, a whisper of a beloved's name. Most people wouldn't have noticed the complexities of that name, but I did.

I'd never heard a name spoken in this exact way before and yet, I understood the magic behind the word. Most people knew that names had power, even if only witches could use them. But I was different because I had a word, a name, of my own. A secret I could never tell.

Even now.

A vision of another world exploded from the center of the shrine, bringing with it a chill so intense that it startled me. The girls stilled beside me, but I gathered my cloak more tightly around my body and leaned forward to get a better view. Impossibly red flowers peeked between pale flakes across the snowy ground.

Blair moved forward and through the archway without hesitation. A collective gasp rose from the girls beside me as she turned back to stare at us.

Excitement bubbled inside of me. This was magic! A gateway between two worlds or places, I wasn't sure which, but it was likely only the beginning of what the witches would show us.

"Come through the portal girls," the blonde said, stepping after Blair. Her smile revealed the pearls of her white teeth. "It's time for your *real* life to begin."

"But where does it lead?" Sirena whispered.

A flash of irritation came and went across the blonde's face, so fast I might've imagined it. "To another part of Tarak." Her voice dripped with sweetness.

"But why can't we just walk?" Sirena wrung her hands as she looked from me to the woman.

The blonde's easy smile returned. "Because the home of The Protectors is almost impossible to reach by land or sea. It's surrounded by mountains so tall, they're frozen year-round."

Sirena turned to me, waiting.

I forced what I hoped was a cocky grin and stepped through the portal.

Relief rushed through me. I was still in one piece, and the only difference in how I felt was… I was colder.

The other girls followed after me, one at a time until we had all made it through. Once we were in the snowy world, I stared back to the forest of my home, at the brown of the trees and the green of the grass. To my surprise, an uneasy feeling settled just below my excitement. I was worlds away from the town I'd always known and in a place of magic. I really needed to have faith that I was making the right choice.

The snowy, leafless trees of our new home whispered a reassurance of familiarity. It was just snow. We got snow too in Duggery. And yet, the scarlet flowers growing in the snow shattered the illusion that this was a similar place. They grew with the freshness of a spring morning, stretching free of the snow, unaffected by the cold and dark of a night lit by a full moon.

I trembled beneath my cloak, looking away from the flowers, and back to my woods.

The scene was fading just as I saw my father break through the trees. His bow was still in hand, his face twisted in panic, and then he was gone.

The whisper of doubt grew louder.

I looked to the other girls, but none seemed to notice, instead, they focused on The Protectors as they continued leading us to some

unseen destination.

A rush of air blasted us for the briefest moment, and I covered my face with my hands, as snow and icy wind rose around us. I peeked up through my fingers as an ice dragon soared too close to us. It's pale white wings beating the snow around us like a storm, and then the dragon was gone as quickly as it had arrived.

It was amazing. An actual ice dragon!

As I adjusted my cloak, I realized that the witches hadn't slowed, and we all seemed to realize it as one because we picked up speed as a group. I couldn't even imagine what could make a person not look when they saw a dragon that close. It was a rare and wonderful thing, especially seeing one of the notoriously shy ice dragons.

But I guess that meant that as a Protector I might get used to such incredible things too. I kind of hoped I didn't though. As I studied the witches' backs, I promised myself that I'd never care so little about miraculous things as they did.

The women moved effortlessly through the snow, and we trudged after them in awe. Small droplets of Blair's blood marked our trail, churning my stomach. Did getting shot with arrows really hurt her so little? Was pain a part of being a Protector?

A fog came from nowhere, curling about our legs and continuing as if we were no more significant than the winter-starved trees. The fog thickened until the world became a sheet of white. The witches didn't hesitate as the fog swallowed them, but we did.

"It was hard enough following them without this fog," Sirena murmured.

"Perhaps they made it in hopes of leaving us behind."

Sirena's comment made me pause as I squinted, trying to identify the women hurrying ahead of us. They certainly didn't seem to care anymore if we were keeping up with them. If we fell too far behind, would they even come back for us? Or would they decide we weren't good enough to join them?

"Maybe this is just a test," I answered, trying to reassure myself as much as them.

No one made any sign if they agreed or disagreed with me, but no one looked happy.

Finally, Bethenny said, "If it's a test, then we better not fail it."

I continued forward, hating the way the fog swallowed my feet. Sirena's hand clutched at my cloak, lifting it just enough to give the chilly air more access to my flesh.

We came to two wooden posts. I studied them closely, wondering at their significance. A memory of something flittered just beyond my comprehension, and I inched between the posts with hesitation. The others followed closely behind, silent except for the sound of heavy

breathing. The snow beneath my feet felt different in a way I couldn't understand, and the wind picked up, battering us with its icy claws.

I curled into myself, trying not to let the hostile environment break down my defenses, and into my mind to muddle my thoughts. But trembles racked through my body, and my breathing grew labored.

At last, the fog thinned just a bit, revealing a bridge, no wider than five feet beneath us. I grasped for railing, but my fingers found none. Sirena crashed into my back as I froze, unable to continue.

Glancing out over the edge, the fog swallowed all views of the ground, creating the illusion we were walking over clouds. But I wasn't fooled, land was somewhere beneath us, perhaps just a short distance, perhaps miles.

Sirena gasped. "They could have warned us."

"Unless they hoped we'd fall to our deaths," Yara mumbled.

My muscles tightened with nerves, but up ahead, dark shapes moved slowly, indicating The Protectors hadn't completely abandoned us.

"They wouldn't have Chosen us just to let us die," I told the others, willing myself to believe my words.

The girls were silent. For a long time we crept forward, seeing little else but our feet and the bridge. And then just as suddenly as the fog came, it dissipated.

"Goddesses' breath!" Sirena cried.

The others joined in her sounds of terror, but my mind filtered the noises out, too overcome by the sight before me. Far below us, a cavernous valley complete with trees and a swirling river came sharply into focus. I stepped forward on shaky legs.

And lost my balance.

Rose

THE STONE at my neck warmed as I stumbled, managing to keep myself from falling. I reached for my necklace, gripping the leather tightly, taking comfort in the familiar. My dizziness faded, and I turned my attention from the deadly drop on either side of us, to what was ahead.

We stood on a bridge nearly as long as our village. It stretched out to meet an island of land, rising from the valley as if called forth by The Protectors for their purposes alone. The island the bridge connected to was formed from massive, flat slabs of stone, varying in color from deep red to soft brown.

My gaze followed the impossible height of the slabs of stone up from the valley to where they connected with our bridge, and it was upon this that I knew our destination stood... It was a castle made of glass.

"Rose. Did you look at the bridge?" Sirena's voice wavered as she asked.

I frowned and almost answered her, but then looked down at my feet. Dreading what I was doing even as I did it, I kicked snow off the bridge, allowing it to fall into the abyss below.

My breath came in rapid bursts. The bridge, it seemed, was also made of glass. Glass so thin it looked as if we might fall through it at any moment. Thin and clear, it could've been the same glass used in our windows back home. I wanted to touch it, to see if it radiated any kind of magic, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Nausea washed over me.

"For goodness sakes!" Bethenny yelled. "Let's keep moving."

She was frustrated and scared. And for once, I understood where she was coming from.

"Is the bridge really made of glass?" Sirena whispered.

"Maybe," I said, my voice coming out higher than I intended. "But

the witches don't seem afraid, so we shouldn't be either."

"Still, I'm not going to let go of your cloak," she said, and I felt her grip the fabric tighter.

I crept over the valley, picking up speed as I went. I'm not sure how much time passed, with the snow falling, and the freezing air clawing beneath my cloak, but it seemed a lifetime before I finally reached the other side.

No one was there when I stepped onto the earth, so I paused outside the open gate to take in the magnificence of the extraordinary place. More red roses surrounded the castle, looking impossibly beautiful as they peeked out of the snow. I was tempted to pick one, but something made me hesitate. Each one looked the same, a single rose on a single stem, petals unfurled just enough to look full and healthy. There was no doubt they were magical, but what purpose could they possibly serve?

"Why would they make the whole thing out of glass?" Sirena's voice was filled with awe.

I looked up, forgetting the roses as I stared at the castle once more. "It can't be glass, or we could see inside."

More than that, the castle simply reflected back the images of the outside world as if to say *don't look at me, I don't exist.*

The building rose into the dark sky, light clinging to it, radiating all the way up the four identical towers to the top, but there was no sign of the light's source. An uneasy feeling settled over me, were we being watched by people on the other side of the glass?

But I couldn't let Sirena sense my nervousness.

I strode forward, and everyone followed. Their voices seemed to fade as I made my way beneath the grand entryway and into a large courtyard. Only this courtyard wasn't open to the elements, instead, plants, trees, and flowers grew beneath the protection of a stone roof nearly fifty feet high.

"What is this place?" Sirena asked, breathlessly.

Blair seemed to come from nowhere, stepping out from behind one of the many large trees. "It's your new home." She was wearing a different dress, the color and fluidity of liquid silver, and there were no signs of her injuries. "We must hurry. Too much time has already passed."

She led us down a cobblestone path and into room after room of splendors. Rugs, tapestries, and paintings of brilliant colors gave the castle a sense of hominess. Crystal, silver, and even gold had been crafted into extraordinary sculptors, standing in places of honor. But the rooms themselves appeared to be made of simple white stone, with walls of large windows staring out into the world beyond.

"I thought the castle was made of glass," Bethenny said, her words

surprisingly reflecting my own thoughts.

Blair glanced back at us. “Each Protector has her own unique abilities. One of our oldest Protectors can create a special glass. One that can only be shattered with a couple of specific magical weapons, and by a certain type of magic. We’ve used this glass many times in the past, to shatter the bridge to protect ourselves from enemies.”

”But is it strong enough?” Sirena asked hesitantly. “It looked so thin…”

Blair’s voice held no reassurance. “It can only be broken in the ways I’ve described.”

She turned back around, ending the conversation without another word.

We were led into an elegant dining hall. The stone walls had been covered with rich wood, oiled until they shone. Arching beams of the same wood drew my eye to the marvelously high ceilings.

Sirena knocked into me from behind, urging me to keep moving toward the largest of the dozen or so long, mahogany tables filling the space. The table was decorated with huge, colorful feathers of blue and green, tied to branches, and nestled in a bed of white flowers.

Plates of food covered the rest of the table, only some of which I recognized. Plums stewed in rose water, meat pies, roasted pig, chicken, and several other piles of meat, as well as, ripened strawberries in white cream.

And those were just the foods I recognized.

Their sweet and spicy scents sang through the air, enticing me to keep moving toward them. Blair strode to the seat at the head of the table and indicated for us to sit. We spread out to stand behind the chairs.

A massive fireplace warmed the room, so we happily shed our cloaks. Yara and Bethenny exchanged grins as silent servants handed them goblets of red wine. I took one as well, and then we all settled into our seats as half a dozen servants came, placing golden plates overflowing with food in front of us.

The servants were all women of varying ages, with hair pulled back in simple braids, and dull brownish-gold dresses trimmed with crisp white. They moved with surprising efficiency, as if they were different arms of a single creature.

Did all the wealthy live like this? Were their needs simply seen to before they could even imagine what they could be?

Wonder blossomed inside of me. This was my life now.

Taking a sip of my drink, my mouth sung with pleasure as the wine, a tantalizing sweet one, with a lingering taste of apricots and an unexpected herb, warmed my body. The shard of rock at my neck was tingling between my breasts, no doubt reminding me of the dangers of

drinking too much. I wanted more, but I placed the goblet down and shifted in my finely carved chair, unsure what to do with myself.

"Is the wine not to your liking?" Blair asked, watching me closely.

"I think your wine would be to anyone's liking," I responded, meaning every word.

"And yet, you don't drink it as your companions do." She took a sip of her wine, the movement drawing my gaze to the mark on her wrist.

Did she wear The Protectors' symbol there? It could've been a knot with an eye in the center, but there was no way to be sure.

"You don't need to worry about impressing us," Blair continued, drawing my attention away from her wrist. "You're here, so you already have. This is now your home."

Behind her, a door opened and the blonde from earlier entered in an outfit made of pink leather.

My jaw dropped. I'd never seen an animal with such a color. And what was more, this was not the fragile creature in the woods with eyes as wide as a baby's, this woman was as dangerous as an unsheathed blade with the dagger at her side, and the anger in her eyes. The change was shocking to the point I suspected magic was involved. An idea that made me stiffen in my chair, eyeing the woman with suspicion.

"It seems you're all becoming settled," she purred, sauntering to the chair across from me. "May I sit?" she asked, her gaze trained on me.

I looked at Blair, who sat at the head of the table, and noticed she watched me. I felt it was her place to address such a question, but I nodded.

The blonde sat down across from me. "My name's Clarissa."

A servant brought her a plate overflowing with food.

She took a few small bites, before turning back to study me, her fork playing with the food on her plate. "Have you had any dinner yet?"

"No."

"You should," Sirena pressed, around a mouthful of half-chewed food. "It's amazing!"

Sirena always had a good appetite, but now she was shoving food in her mouth faster than she could chew, in an uncharacteristic display of poor manners.

I picked up my fork too, but in truth, I wasn't entirely hungry, even for the assortments of food laid before me. Something in the prickling of my necklace made me feel as agitated as a cat on the hunt. But I didn't want to stand out more than I already had, so I placed my fork into a small piece of tender meat.

I took one bite, but it was more than enough. I finally understood the moans of pleasure from my companions, as my voice added to the sounds.

The meat tasted like food from the goddesses themselves. It was a burst of flavor so intense that if I added up every enjoyable meal I'd ever had in my life, they still wouldn't have brought me as much pleasure as that one bite.

Forgetting all caution, I dug into my food, enjoying the immense tastes that flooded my senses. Candied yams, dumplings, chocolate cakes, and sweet fruits in a honeyed sauce were just a few, and for a while, there was no sound except the clatter of silverware. And then, the shard tingled again, and I abruptly stopped eating. My plate still overflowed with food, but if the women were right, we'd have plenty more meals like this one.

I touched the necklace beneath my dress, wanting to reassure it, again. *I'm still fine*.

It grew colder in a flash of annoyance.

Releasing it, I turned back to the meal, trying to recapture my enthusiasm.

But instead, I felt Clarissa's gaze trained on me.

I looked up, not willing to back down.

"Are you afraid of me?" she asked, with barely concealed pleasure.

Raising a brow, I tried to sound confident. "No, should I be?"

She grinned. "If you're smart."

"Clarissa," Blair said, the word a warning.

Looking up, I noticed the other girls watching our exchange.

"I'm just teasing her," the blonde said, itching beneath the leather bracelet on her wrist. "She just looks too tightly wound for a girl at a celebration."

Her words stung, even though I wished they didn't.

Bethenny laughed, adding to my embarrassment. "Ignore her. She's not used to this kind of thing. No one invited her to anything back in Duggery."

Interest flared in Clarissa's eyes. "Why?"

"Well," Bethenny said, taking a large gulp from her goblet. "Just look at her."

My stomach dropped. This was the moment she ruined things for me here too, pointed out to the women how I looked like our enemies.

The blonde, however, simply frowned. "What do you mean?"

"She looks like a Northerner, of course!"

It seemed to take a painfully long time for Clarissa to answer. "That's it?" She picked up her glass, annoyance in her tone. "I hoped it'd be more than some small-town prejudice."

Silence followed her words.

Sirena grinned and jostled me with her shoulder.

Relief and surprise rushed through me, and I took another bite of my food, my appetite renewed.

“There’s more.” Bethenny’s words were dark and full of hidden meanings. “Her family has secrets.”

I froze, swallowing the hard lump of food in my mouth. Us? We didn’t have secrets. Of course, other than that my mother had become a Protector and no one had told me.

“So what happens next?” Sirena rushed out, obviously trying to change the subject. “I mean when we start being, well, Protectors.”

Blair sounded tired as she answered. “We unlock your powers and train you to use them. Depending on what kinds you develop, you may stay in this castle, or get placed in one of the towns or cities in Tarak.”

“Is the training hard?” Sirena asked, worry lacing the question as she took another slow drink of her wine.

“No. It’s simply important. Knowing your strengths and weaknesses will allow you to… be successful in your new position.”

Sirena nodded, then smiled hesitantly. “Did you know my great-grandmother, Delera? She became a Protector too.”

Without missing a beat, Blair answered. “Of course. She is a very fine woman.”

“Will I get to meet her?”

Clarissa laughed. “Sooner than you think, I’m sure.”

“Because of how long Protectors live,” Blair explained, glaring at the blonde, “many of you may very well meet relatives of yours. Some you might not even have known existed.”

I hesitated. This was my chance. “Do you know my mother, Calyce?”

To my surprise, the room fell silent.

Uh oh. What had I done?

Rose

BLAIR'S SILVER gaze pinned me to my chair. "Yes, but we shouldn't spend your whole celebration discussing relatives who have joined The Order."

The conversation died on an awkwardly tense note, but the girls returned to their food and wine as if completely unaware of the unexplainable strain that lingered. Only Sirena sat quietly, stiffly, an expression of extreme discomfort on her face.

I tried to calm my nerves, telling myself that there'd be plenty of other opportunities to ask these women about my mother. But somehow, I sensed a mystery, one Blair would rather I didn't solve.

Unfortunately, she had no idea how focused I could be when I wanted something badly enough.

My plotting was interrupted when another woman entered the great hall, followed by six servants. She moved with the grace of a water bird, gliding fluidly on her long legs. She wore a black gown tapered just below her breast before it flowed down and gathered at her ankles. Bare feet poked out from beneath the silky gown. But her hair, much to my surprise, was hidden beneath a piece of black cloth, intricately tied to hide all traces of her hair from sight.

"Just in time for dessert," Clarissa purred, with a mocking twist of her lips, at the woman who settled into the chair next to her. Then, the blonde turned to me. "This is Meisha. She was the other Protector at The Choosing."

The woman turned her amber-colored eyes towards me.

I stiffened, my breath catching in my throat. No human had eyes like hers.

Clarissa laughed. "Don't mind her, she's from a jungle a long way from here. Her people are very different from our own."

Another silent girl placed a strange mixture the color of honey in a bowl before the amber-eyed creature. She raised it to her lips and

drank slowly. When she was done, she let the bowl drop on the table and rose.

"If we should not meet again," she whispered, her heavily accented voice drawing the attention of the others at the table. "I was impressed by your bravery. It has been a long time since someone thought to refuse The Order's invitation."

She turned and walked back out the way she'd come, and I relaxed into my chair. Her presence, her eyes, made me ill at ease. Blair and Clarissa exchanged a glance of disapproval, and I wondered if they too found her upsetting.

"Well, that was strange!" Bethenny giggled, wine sloshing out of her drink with each exaggerated movement.

Yara dissolved into laughter.

Sirena turned to me, her expression worried. "Perhaps they've had too much." Her voice was barely a squeak in my ear, but I nodded in agreement.

I'd never been drunk. Waking up every morning to find my dad passed out on the table, or the floor, had killed any desire for the experience. But even though my personal knowledge was limited, these girls seemed to lose control shockingly fast. The wine must've been stronger than what they were used to drinking. I noticed, with some approval, that Sirena seemed to have lost her interest in her wine.

"You don't like the wine?" I whispered, keeping my gaze on Yara who was singing some old song from our youth about boys who tell lies.

She leaned closer to me. "It's really good, just something about this place feels off." She gave a humorless laugh. "I'm probably being silly. This is what we always wanted, after all."

She was right though. It was unnerving. Just a short time before, Yara had looked like she wanted nothing more than to return home to her father. Now, she seemed entirely settled into her new life.

Yara turned as if reading my mind. "I can't believe my father had me so afraid of this place." A bubble of drunken laughter escaped her lips. "It's like being a princess!"

I was saved from having to reply as servants rushed into the room, clearing our plates away.

"This castle is lovely," Sirena responded, but the words sounded forced.

As the last dish was cleared from the table, Blair rose as if impatient. "I'm so glad to see all of you enjoying yourselves so much, but I want you to know there is one more thing that must be done before you're fully Protectors." She pressed her hands onto the dark mahogany wood of the massive table. "The Choosing Ceremony."

Her final words sent goosebumps racing along the skin of my arms.

"I thought we already had that," Bethenny belted out drunkenly.

Blair's expression didn't change. "No, that was just the beginning." She paused, and a wicked smile touched Clarissa's lips. "We made our choice today by picking all of you, but there are more choices to be made. Tomorrow, you'll have the final ceremony before becoming Protectors in all ways."

Clarissa's smile spread. "But don't worry about that now. Just relax and enjoy yourselves, as if tonight was your last night." She winked at Blair. "All of us have stories of our first night here. It's a tradition to have too much fun."

Blair's expression was humorless. "You'll each be shown to your rooms. If there is anything you need, pull the cord by your beds." A forced smile twisted her lips. "If not, as Clarissa said, eat, drink, and have fun."

We were led from the dining hall by another servant and shown to our rooms. The drunken girls entered their bedrooms first, with gasps of appreciation and more laughter, before Bethenny shouted she'd found more wine.

Yara raced into the other girl's room, slamming the door behind them.

We remained in the hall, staring at our unopened doors, while the servant waited silently behind us.

Sirena gave me a curious glance. "Are we—?"

But I didn't want her to say anything in front of the servant that could give away our uncertainty, so I cut her off, "So is this where we'll be staying for now on? Or will they move us later? No one has told us what we'll be doing, or what'll be expected of us."

The young girl stared at me with blank eyes.

My breath caught in my throat.

Dogs had more intelligence in their eyes than this girl. She neither blinked nor stared. The glazed quality of her gaze hinted that her mind was somewhere far from her body.

A chill ran down my spine. This is how the victims of the Blood Wizard Sazar and his brothers were described. People stripped of everything that made them human and left to do simply as their masters commanded.

"Are you all right?" I reached out a hand but stopped just before I touched her shoulder.

"Yes." Her even voice struck me as strange. Not even a single word should hold so little emphasis, as if the speaker had no idea what they spoke.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Do you require anything else?

It took me a second to form the word. “No.”

She jerked into motion, turning and walking away.

Sirena looked at me. “That’s a bit… scary.”

“Maybe she’s just tired,” I said, trying my best to hide my horror.

She scrunched up her mouth. “I guess.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “We just have to remember, this is what we’ve been dreaming of.”

“My dream wasn’t like this. You?”

I stiffened. “Not exactly, but it isn’t… horrible.”

She met my gaze. “Come on, Rose, don’t put on a brave face. How do you really feel?”

I clutched the cord around my neck. She was watching me, waiting, so I sputtered the words as quickly as I could. “Something about this place makes me feel like we’re in a snake hole.”

Her shoulders relaxed, and she nodded.

Some slight sound had me whirling around.

Meisha stepped around the corner, her gaze locked on me. “You’re the Vidoryn child, aren’t you?”

“Why do you ask?” the question shot from my mouth before I could stop it.

The woman’s eyes narrowed, and she looked around the hall. “It seems you have a lot of questions you want to be answered. Perhaps I could help?” Moving with an unnatural speed, she lifted one of the tapestries from the wall and disappeared behind it.

My heart raced as I took a step forward.

Sirena grabbed my arm. “You can’t be serious.”

Logic told me it was a terrible idea to follow the strange woman into some dark place. But for once, I didn’t care. I’d do just about anything to find out about my mother, about someone who might actually care about me.

I took a deep breath. “I know this is hard to understand, but my whole life I’ve just accepted my mom was gone, and I was stuck with my life. Now though, I think I have a chance to get to know her. I don’t know why that’s so important to me, but it is.”

“Just wait,” she begged. “Blair may tell you later.”

Biting my lip, I avoided her gaze. All these years alone with a father who hated me, I’d tried to imagine my mother. Yet every time I did, I had to remember she hadn’t just walked away from him, she’d walked away from me. I thought I’d done something wrong, so the idea she’d simply been Chosen allowed a tiny seed of hope… that she might still be somewhere, thinking about her only daughter, and maybe missing me too.

I gave Sirena my best apologetic look. “Maybe she could even tell me something that’d make this place seem less scary and… full of

secrets."

She sighed, but I could already see she knew there'd be no changing my mind. "I don't like this."

I forced a smile. "I know, but you love me anyway."

She rolled her eyes, a slight grin playing across her lips. "If you aren't back soon, I'll go look for you… and I'll bring those drunks with me."

I laughed nervously. "So I'll be back soon."

She went to her room, opened the door, and stared back at me for the briefest moment before going into her room.

I released a slow breath and looked toward the tapestry. This place was creepy and unsettling. I didn't trust any of the women. But if someone was willing to give me answers, then I needed to be brave enough to follow them.

Besides, these women had chosen me. They wouldn't go through all that trouble just to hurt me now. Right?

Rose

STEPPING BEHIND THE TAPESTRY, I entered a poorly lit passageway, so narrow I had to turn slightly to move through. I shuffled forward until I reached a turn, and then followed it to a small room lit by a dozen flickering candles. The room had no windows and shelves full of old books covered the walls. In the center of the space, a tattered and faded rug covered most of the stone floor, and two chairs sat facing each other, the color of dried blood.

Meisha sat in one of these chairs, her back straight. “I know *of* your mother, child.” Her eyes fluttered to the ground before she pointed one long finger to the other chair. “And I know *of* your father.”

My heartbeat quickened as I crossed the room and eased myself into the chair opposite her. The smell of dust filled my nose, and I fought the urge to sneeze. “Was my mother one of you? Was she a Protector of Tarak?”

Meisha hung her head further, as if she might fall over, and her thin shoulders sagged. “She was *almost* a Protector, until your father came for her.”

I nearly tumbled forward. “What—what do you mean?”

“There is very little I can tell you,” she whispered, her accent making each word like a hiss. “But, your decision in the Choosing Ceremony is very important.”

I tried to hide my annoyance as I spoke. “I don’t care about the ceremony. Tell me about my parents. Did my father try to stop my mother from joining? Was that how he was hurt?”

At last, she looked up at me.

I collapsed back into the seat. Her pupils had grown until nothing was left of her amber eyes, and her tongue flickered out to glide across her razor-sharp teeth before she spoke. “You are as foolish as your mother if you do not heed me well. She too cared nothing for the

ceremony, nothing for anything but returning to your father, and she paid the ultimate price. *We* paid the ultimate price for her foolishness."

My mind whirled. "She didn't want to join? I thought we had a choice?"

She laughed, or at least made a sound like an animal mimicking a laugh. "Had you chosen to return to your father tonight at the portal, they would have forced you to come with us, or killed you."

My skin felt cold and damp. "What happened to my mother?"

She tilted her head. "They forced her to join, or at least tried to." Her tongue darted out once more, and she jerked as if woken from a restless sleep. "But none of that matters now. All that matters is that you choose to become one of us."

I tried to sound brave, "After all you've told me, what would possibly make me want to join The Protectors?"

Meisha leaped on me.

The chair flew out from under me, and I was knocked onto the floor beneath her, her terrifying face inches from mine.

"Are you frightened of me, girl?" she asked, husky and breathless.

I nodded slowly.

"Well, I am the least frightening thing you will see for the remainder of your life. And if you should make the wrong choice tonight, the image of me now will likely be the last thing that passes through your mind before you die."

Then, she was gone. I wasn't certain if I blinked, or if a candle or two had gone out, but the room felt darker, and the woman was nowhere to be found.

I rose to a sitting position and gripped my arms until my fingers bit painfully into my flesh. Part of me wanted to go running, screaming, from the fears she'd inflamed inside of me, but the other part of me refused to back down. Even from this.

Rising on shaky legs, I moved to one of the candles, resting on a partially empty shelf. It flickered harmlessly in the small glass holder.

I felt a word filled with power catch in my throat. Glancing towards the shadowed hall, I tapped the wooden shelf, leaving marks in the dust. These women thought to frighten me, to force me to make the choice they wished, but they might find me a little different than the helpless girls they were used to manipulating.

Pulling on the cord around my neck, I brought the shard of stone out. It dangled over the fire, glittering shades of purple in the light. My father had given me the stone when I was just a little girl, but I'd known instantly it was more than something pretty.

It'd opened up another world. A world of magic I'd suddenly sensed flowing through all things. Most girls had to wait until they

were much older to know whether they had powers, or be trained by the witches to learn how to tap into it. My magic had roared to life the moment the necklace touched my flesh.

I'd sensed it, but didn't know how to use it. Not until one night a few weeks after receiving the necklace. I'd gotten turned around in the woods. Freezing in the dark, alone and afraid, a name had come to my lips. Several times I'd spoken it in desperation before it worked.

Since then, I'd tried several other names. None had worked. *Yet*. But that one name was enough for me. For now.

"*Hestia*, *Hestia*, *Hestia*," I chanted the Goddess of Fire's name over and over again, watching the stone change from purple to a deep scarlet.

The word was just as I practiced it, a song, a prayer. I forced emotion into each syllable until my chest hurt. But I couldn't stop, not until the intonation, pitch, and inflection were perfect.

Warmth gathered around me, a physical sensation tied to the gathering of my powers. Like pulling back an arrow on a bow, I held my magic, waiting until I showed it what I wanted it to do.

In my mind, I pictured a flame being swallowed by the air, and tingling spread across my flesh as I released my magic. Moments later, the flame went out, followed by all the other candles in the room.

I cursed. "Nice work, Rose."

It was easy to tell magic what to do, but in my experience, it rarely worked exactly the way I wanted it to.

The smell of smoke drifted to me in the darkened room, and I made my way cautiously to the hall, where a tiny light filtered through the shadows. My hand reached out, feeling what I couldn't see. I moved forward, turning to slide down the hall. I walked for some time and frowned, wondering if perhaps I'd turned the wrong way, when a light appeared ahead of me.

"Can you believe this?"

I paused, letting my hand linger on the cold stone. The voice was familiar, but I wasn't quite sure from where.

"I never imagined being Chosen, and now I'm here!" The speaker dissolved into giggles, and I relaxed. It was Yara.

Continuing forward, I saw, much to my surprise that the light was coming from a missing row of bricks about as wide as my shoulders. Kneeling, I glanced through the space. Pressure grew at my temples. What exactly was I looking at? And then, I realized. I was on the other side of the fireplace.

Could this be another way out of the dark passageways?

With one finger I touched the brick, then jerked back at the flash of pain. It was blazing hot. Using my skirt, I pushed and shoved at the wall separating me from the fireplace until it started to slide free in

one direction. Pushing harder, a huge wall of brick rolled soundlessly out of the way.

At the same time, I leaped back from the fire, burning dangerously close to me. This was a way out, but not one I could exit without help.

"I always hoped I'd be Chosen since I *am* the prettiest girl in town and all," Bethenny said, followed by a loud burp.

Rolling my eyes, I shouted, "Yara, it's Rose! I'm behind the fire."

"Rose," I heard Yara stammer.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead. "Yeah, I'll explain later. But can you just put the fire out?"

Seconds ticked by, and I moved back into the coolness of the passageway. I wasn't sure if the aching in my head was from using magic, or from the dust and smoke I'd been inhaling. More time passed, and I started worrying that the girls had passed out drunkenly somewhere when I heard the sound of water splashing. The light from the fire was snuffed out, leaving me in near-darkness. Smoke filled the passageway.

Coughing, I tried to wave the smoke away from my face.

"The fire's out!" Yara shouted.

Making a quick prayer to the goddesses that the drunks hadn't left a few embers simmering, I ducked down and ran through the huge fireplace, doing my best to lift my dress as I stepped over the sopping logs. When I got to the other side, I held onto a chair, coughing until my lungs felt clearer.

"You all right?" Yara asked, putting a comforting hand on my back.

I nodded and straightened, brushing soot off my sleeves.

Then, I looked back at the fireplace. I'd need to slide the brick back into place, or else someone would know I'd been back there. Holding my breath and using my skirt, I trampled back through the fireplace, nearly stumbling over the half-burned logs. With great difficulty, I managed to slide the bricks back into place.

Again, I emerged into a great open space.

My head cleared slowly as the details of the bedroom came into focus. It was lit by candles in delicate scones made of colored glass hanging from the walls. From the roof, chains made of silver held more colored glass hanging in glass scones, and a light flickered from these as well, giving the impression of stars.

"Wow," I murmured. "Beautiful!"

"Forget the room," Bethenny said, wine sloshing from a goblet in her hand. "What in Persephone were you doing spying on us?"

I shrugged. "I got lost."

Bethany looked as if she might argue, but stared off blankly instead.

“Thanks for helping me,” I said, weaving toward my escape. “But maybe… eat something.”

“I couldn’t eat another bite! That food was to die for!” Bethenny belted after me.

Turning, the words tumbled out before I could stop them. “Maybe drink a little less then.”

My words hung awkwardly between all of us.

“Oh come on,” Bethenny said, rolling her eyes. “You heard The Protectors. They said tonight we’re supposed to have *a little too much fun*. I know you didn’t fit in back home, but you’ve got a chance at fitting in here. Don’t you even care?”

“I can fit in without drinking.”

“Really?” she grinned stupidly. “Have you even tasted this wine? It’s the best thing I’ve ever had. It makes me feel… free… amazing.”

Her complete sincerity unnerved me. “Maybe it’s drugged.”

Yara took a step towards me. “Rose. You can’t be serious.”

My cheeks heated. “Just, maybe, get some sleep.”

I opened the door and stepped out into the hall, trailing soot as I moved. Sirena’s room was directly across from Bethenny’s, and it had a stunning carving of a deer on the dark wood. I tapped lightly on the door, then opened it.

The brightly lit room had a huge window, with long orange curtains drawn back to reveal the dark night. Multi-colored lights hung by silver chains from the ceiling, like a scattering of enchanted stars. On one end of the massive bedroom, a lavish four-poster bed with orange drapes dominated the space. Sirena sat on the other side, where two plush chairs faced a roaring fire.

Sirena’s bored eyes widened as she turned to me, and she jumped from the chair. “What happened?”

“The girls are still drinking,” I said, crossing the room to plop into the chair across from her.

She frowned. “That’s not surprising, but what happened with that Protector?”

For the briefest second, I considered not telling her. But the urge came and went in an instant. This wasn’t the kind of information I could protect her from. She needed to hear the truth.

“The woman, Meisha, says we need to choose to stay,” I explained.

Sirena sat back down in her chair across from me and pulled her knees to her chest. “What happens if we don’t?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it’ll be good.” I bite my lip, hesitating for only a second. “Meisha said they would’ve killed us or forced us to go if we’d refused them at the portal.”

Sirena’s head jerked off her knees. “Why would anyone need to be *forced* to go if this is such a great place?” She shook her head. “We

need to be careful here. Something's going on that we don't understand."

Suddenly exhausted, I slid off the chair and lay on the rug. The colorful glass candles full of light danced mockingly above. My eyes closed as an unexpected exhaustion raced through me. It was long past the time I usually went to bed, and there wasn't anything I wanted more than to sleep.

"I wish I hadn't gotten Chosen," Sirena said, startling me from my thoughts.

Opening my eyes, I stared at her. She looked tiny with her knees drawn up to her chest and far younger than her sixteen years.

"What was it that changed your mind about this place?" I asked, knowing my necklace was probably a big part of my anxiety.

She looked at the fire. "I don't know. I guess it's that I've never seen you so nervous. Usually, you're the brave one."

"Me?" I repeated, shocked. "You're the brave one."

She shook her head, her expression completely serious. "No. I'm brave when it comes to talking to a cute boy or stealing pastries from my mom. But you… I've never met another person like you before. That's why I wanted to be friends with you. It's like every time something scary comes along, you just deal with it, without blinking an eye."

I stared at her, astounded. "I just do what I have to do."

She met my gaze. "No. It's more than that."

Looking away, I stared at the flames as they danced in the hearth. "So what are we going to do? You think we're just nervous, or do you think there's something strange going on here?"

"I don't know. But is it silly if I kind of want to go home?"

I shook my head. "Not at all." Holding the cord around my neck, I thought of what waited for me back in Duggery. "But I want to be sure about this place before we do anything rash."

The silence stretched between us.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep here until I know what these women are planning for us."

I rubbed at my aching head. "Yeah, if only we could read minds."

A little bit of fear crept into her voice. "At least we need to find something out before the ceremony. The way they talked about it, well, it gave me the creeps."

She was right. If only we had a way…

My eyes opened, and I sat up. "Maybe there *is* something we can do."

"What?" Sirena asked, letting her legs drop onto the rug.

"I found a passageway behind the fireplace in Bethenny's room. If there are others behind all the fireplaces, maybe we can spy a bit."

Sirena's mouth formed into a surprised *oh*.

"But, we'd have to go right away."

She leaped from her chair, beaming at me. "Brilliant."

I stood too, the pressure at my temples easing. "We just have to—" A knock at the door made me swallow the remainder of my words.

The servant entered, her face a mask of indifference. "The ceremony will begin in one hour."

"A ceremony tonight?" Sirena looked at me in shock. "But I thought we were supposed to be celebrating tomorrow."

The servant's blank eyes gave nothing away. "The Choosing Ceremony will begin in one hour."

"Why so soon?" Sirena pressed, terror in her voice.

Her question was met with silence.

I swallowed down my panic. "And what happens at the ceremony?"

She didn't react.

"Ask her something else," Sirena whispered.

"Where is Blair's room?"

The girl's young face twisted, and she shuddered. "Lady Blair is six rooms that way," she answered, her voice monotone as she pointed.

She waited, her light brown hair tied back into a knot at the base of her neck, the same hairdo as all the servants. The girl didn't blink as she stood, but she seemed to be wrecked with frequent, small muscle spasms.

"You can go," Sirena blurted. "You're dismissed."

The girl turned slowly, almost drunkenly. She walked to the door, far too closely, opened the handle with firmness, and then was gone, closing the door softly behind her.

Sirena gripped her arms. "Why would they encourage all of us to get drunk and then surprise us by having the ceremony tonight?"

The only thing I could imagine is that they didn't want any of us in our right minds

I tore my gaze from the door. "I guess all we can do is investigate."

"Or run away?" she gave an awkward laugh.

My mouth went dry. I hadn't thought of that. Sirena didn't really have a reason to stay if she was scared. She had a loving home and dozens of adoring men to return to.

"If you want to leave you can." A desperate note tinged my words, even though I tried to hide it.

She took my hand in her smaller one. "Remember, we stick together. And besides, I haven't completely given up on this place."

"If you're sure…"

Smiling, she walked to the fire. "I am. So now what?"

"Now, we find out the truth."

Rose

I FOUND a water bucket and threw the contents over the fire. It was swallowed with a loud hiss of flames being quenched. I tapped my foot impatiently, waiting for the smoke to clear a bit, and then started pacing the room, feeling a need to move.

"Soteria, protect us," I whispered, wondering if the goddesses could hear me even in this strange place.

Sirena remained sitting, tapping her fingers on her knees. I didn't blame her. Once we did the ceremony, there was no going back, and she actually had a life back home. Chances are we were just in a new place, with new people, and feeling nervous. But we needed to know for sure.

"Is it good enough now?"

I turned back to the fire, where most of the smoke had cleared. "I guess it has to be."

We only had an hour, after all.

Grabbing a blanket, I stooped into the fireplace, searching for the row of missing bricks. It was harder to find on this side, just a couple inches visible at the very top of the back. But eventually, I got my fingers, wrapped in the blanket, into the crack, and slid open the passageway.

I took a break to catch my breath in the room. "There has got to be an easier way."

"I'm sure there's a lever for it, somewhere." Sirena watched me as she spoke, a small smile on her lips.

I forced myself to smile back. "Wish I'd thought of that earlier." Wiping sweaty hair out of my face, I took another breath of clean air. "Ready?"

She nodded.

We stooped as we walked through the fireplace, trying our best not to touch the scalding brick. Reaching the passageway, we stood up,

and Sirena took hold of the back of my skirt. We passed fireplace after fireplace, known to us by the tiny slit of light streaming into the passageway, and the piping hot brick we turned sideways to avoid touching. At last, we reached number six. We sat down, drawing our knees up to our chest to avoid being burned.

And waited.

The light from the tiny slit just above us sent shadows dancing in the confined space. Minutes of absolute silence ticked by before Sirena shifted restlessly beside me. My knees and legs cramped and ached, and I began to doubt our plan altogether. Was there a better way? Should we have been escaping instead of spying all this time?

But if we ran, we'd have to make it out of the castle, over the bridge, and back to the shrine. And if we could manage that, we still had to be able to open the portal between this place and our home town. Would I even be able to speak the name of the Goddess of Travel well enough to open the portal if we were to reach it? I doubted it, but maybe we had to try.

I started to rise when I heard the sound of a door slamming.

"We shouldn't have chosen all of them!" It was Meisha speaking, and her voice was almost a growl.

Clarissa giggled. "It's *so* cute how much you value life."

"We should all value life," Meisha snarled, and I cringed as something hit the wall. "*Every* life!"

Sirena yanked on my skirt, no doubt gripping it fiercely in her small hands.

"And we do," Blair interrupted, her monotone voice a much-needed break from the tension. "Or else we would not be here."

Silence enveloped the room, and I stiffened. My breath sounded loud in my ears.

"The truth is," Blair continued, "Sacrifices must be made for the greater good."

"But none of their magic is strong enough, except the girl's," Meisha murmured, so quietly I had to lean forward to make out each word.

"So the others will die."

Die? We were all going to die?

Sirena squeaked and shifted in reaction to Clarissa's words.

I stiffened, waiting. Had they heard the noise?

"You monstrous she-demon!" Meisha shouted, apparently still unaware of our spying.

"Stop!" Blair cried, this time her voice was no longer calm. "You might not like what we are, Meisha, but we're necessary to the greater good. Now go freshen up. The ceremony will begin soon."

A door slammed, and I reached out, pressing Sirena forward. We

rose and made our way quietly back to Sirena's room. But with every step my resolution grew, this place wasn't what it seemed. And if we stayed, we'd be dead.

When we reached Sirena's room, we ducked back through and closed the bricks behind us. Then, we collapsed onto the rug, neither of us speaking for a long time. All of this… it felt like a bad dream. The Protectors, the women every girl wanted to grow up to be, were evil? They planned to kill us for some reason? Why? None of it made any sense.

"Who do you think 'the girl' was?"

I lay on my back, staring up at the candles strung like stars above us. But I wasn't considering Sirena's question. Even though my instincts had told me there was something wrong with this place, I wish I'd been wrong. I wish it'd been everything I'd always dreamed of.

"It doesn't matter. We need to get out of here or chances are that only one of us is going to live to see tomorrow."

She paused for a long minute. "Maybe we shouldn't tell the others."

My breath caught in my throat. How could she even consider something so terrible?

"We have to tell them, at least to give them the chance to escape."

"But we'll move faster without them." She argued.

She was right, logically, but there was no way I could do that. I might not like all of them, but I wouldn't condemn any of them to death, at least not without trying to save them.

"No."

"And what if they don't come with us? What if they tell The Protectors instead and then we get trapped here too?"

"No!" I shouted the word, sitting up and piercing her with a glare. "We can't just leave them to *die*."

Sirena said nothing more, but her disapproval sizzled between us.

"We should get ready." I stood up, trying to hide my irritation with her. "It's going to be cold, and… goddesses' teeth, I left my cloak in the dining hall." I knew there were probably more cloaks in Sirena's wardrobe, but it was my finest one, and I dreaded leaving it behind.

She pointed at her bed. "The servant brought them from the dining hall while you were talking to Meisha."

I hurried over to find my dark green cloak folded neatly on the bed. It felt wrong to draw it over my ash-covered dress, but we couldn't waste time changing.

Sirena pulled her black cloak on, opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Silently, we walked across the hall. When we entered, Bethenny

and Yara had changed. Their long gowns were the color of gold, and they spun and danced in the expensive attire. Joy lit their faces as the light material drifted around them like clouds.

I envied them.

Yara stopped when she saw me, a silly smile on her lips. “Do you see our gowns? There are more in the chests than I’ve ever seen in my life!”

I crossed the room and took her hand. She swayed slightly, but her eyes locked onto mine. “Yara, I’m sorry, but we need to go.”

She stared blankly back at me. “What?”

“Sirena and I heard The Protectors talking, heard Blair. We’re going to die tonight at the ceremony. We need to leave.”

Bethenny came towards me, pushing between Yara and myself. “Liar!” she shouted, although the word came out slurred. “If you want to leave, then go, but we aren’t going with you.”

Anger leaped inside me, but I forced myself to remain in control. All that mattered right now was getting Sirena, Yara, and… Bethenny, if she wished, to safety.

“Tell them,” I said, eyeing Sirena.

“It’s true,” she glared at the angry red-head. “We aren’t going to line up like sheep to the slaughter. We’re leaving now, and anyone who wants to come can.”

“Please,” I begged, staring at Yara. “Please. I promise we’re telling the truth.”

Yara’s eyes were solemn. “You’re sure about what you heard?”

I nodded.

“All right.” Her gaze met mine. “I trust you.”

Yara picked up a dark cloak and placed it around her shoulders, concealing most of her new dress. Then, she turned to Bethenny.

The other girl blinked and seemed to come to life. “Don’t listen to her.” She sneered, advancing on us. “Every single one of you knows she comes from a family of liars.”

I flinched at her cruel words.

But before I thought of a good response, Sirena came to stand directly at my side. “Don’t.” The word was a threat.

Bethenny didn’t back down. “Old man Tuie dies, and not long after, they show up claiming to be long-lost cousins. But funny how he never mentioned them to anyone.”

“So what!” Sirena said, putting her hands on her hips. “That doesn’t make them liars.”

But Bethenny wasn’t done. “Her dad claimed to be a farmer, but Brotlee’s dad had to show him how to work a field. How do you explain that?”

Doubt flashed in Sirena’s eyes. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

Bethenny stepped forward, crowding us both. “My Ma says they’re traitors to the crown.”

Sirena slapped her.

The sound echoed through the room.

“Don’t you dare speak that vicious lie, or I’ll cut out your tongue.”

I looked between the red mark forming on Bethenny’s cheek, and the frightening expression on Sirena’s face. Shocked.

Bethenny’s hand clenched into a fist. “Mark my words, Rose, you’ll lead us all into trouble. The Protectors will slice your throats and throw you off that bridge, a fitting end for a traitor and her friends.”

I caught Sirena’s hand before she could strike again, my body trembling. “Let’s go.”

If we were leaving Bethenny behind, the last thing we wanted to do was anger her more. Turning on us all would no doubt bring her limitless pleasure. And what was more, there was a frightening ring of truth to her accusations that left my stomach flip-flopping all over itself.

Just more questions I didn’t have the answers to.

“You’re all fools,” Bethenny muttered, glaring.

“Maybe,” Yara said, as we gathered at the door. “But, you’ll keep this a secret right?”

Her chin tilted up. “I’m no squealer.”

That was enough for me. I opened the door.

Peering out and seeing no one, I dashed down the hall. Many times I wasn’t certain which way to go, but Sirena always seemed to know. A few times our group ran into servants, but they walked past us, their expressions unchanging.

When we, at last, entered the courtyard, a chill washed over me. The darkest part of the night had come, and with it, a bitter cold. I ran down the cobblestone path until I reached the bridge made of glass. My breath puffed out before me, but none of us spoke.

I eased my pace as I crept across the bridge, with me in the lead and Sirena’s hand clenched in mine. Snow drifted down on us as we pressed on, and icy winds clawed at our exposed faces and hands. A few cries and sounds of fear came from the girls behind me, and I knew we were all thinking the same thing. Would a breeze eventually sweep us to a gruesome death below?

At last, I spotted land ahead. The tension building beneath my skin eased. I looked back at Sirena, smiling, and she responded with a smile of her own.

But then, she looked around me. Her smile faltered and twisted into a look of horror.

My necklace flared to life, blazing painfully against my flesh, and bringing with it my sense of terror. I turned slowly back around,

knowing that death waited for me.

Rose

NOT TWENTY FEET in front of me stood a line of grim faces. Blair, Clarissa, Meisha, and Bethenny waited. Clarissa laughed at our looks of terror, and I heard gasps from behind me.

"This is unfortunate," Blair said, crossing her arms before her chest. "But, we all make mistakes. If you should rethink this choice and come back with us now, we will forget your poor behavior."

My stomach turned. We'd come too far to turn back. Perhaps, I could use my magic to free us.

But the only name I knew for certain was the Goddess of Fire, and I couldn't see how starting a fire would do anything but momentarily distract them. It wouldn't give me enough time to escape, especially with my friends.

And besides, then they'd know my secret.

"What now?" Sirena squeaked behind me.

The sound of my heart pounding filled my ears. "I don't know. Give me a second to think."

The world was closing in on me. I couldn't give up, but I couldn't escape.

Clarissa smirked. "What a hard choice. Go back to a warm castle, or get thrown to your deaths."

Sirena grabbed my wrist, her nails digging into my flesh. "But we heard you were going to kill us anyway," she accused, her voice shaking.

Blair's eyes filled with guilt, then widened with false shock. "Of course not. Why would we go through all the trouble of bringing you here just to kill you?"

Sirena drew closer to me. "I don't want to die." She sobbed the last word.

Fear clouded my vision. "Let me think!"

I needed to risk it. The last time I'd been in danger I'd learned The

Goddess of Fire's name. Surely this dangerous situation would allow me to speak another.

"Eris!" I screamed.

The women looked at me, eyes wide.

"Eris!" I tried the Goddess of Destruction, Strife, and Discord's name again, changing the emphasis of each letter. "Eris, Eris, Eris!" I experimented with intonation, volume, and tone, but still, nothing happened.

Clarissa cackled. "Did you take a bump to the head or something?"

Blair silenced her with a snap of her wrist. "Don't you see?" Her gaze was calculating. "She has power over the Goddesses' names."

The shock on Clarissa's face would've been comical if I wasn't fighting for my life. "No. That's impossible. Only two Protectors in all of—"

"Silence," Blair ordered. A tender smile curved her mouth. "It's okay, Rose. I can teach you how to use your powers. I can teach you to be one of the most powerful women in this world."

"What do they mean?" Sirena's voice held pain and confusion. "What are they talking about?"

I wanted to turn around, to face her, but I couldn't risk taking my gaze off The Protectors. "I'm sorry, Sirena. I should've told you."

She was quiet for a moment. "Then, you always knew you'd be Chosen."

Guilt ate at my heart. "No. Sometimes women with powers aren't Chosen. I thought it gave me a better chance, but I wasn't sure. I promise."

Clarissa smirked. "I'm sure she trusts you a lot right now."

Blair's hands curled into fists. "This is too dangerous. She's going to get hurt." She turned to the smirking blonde beside her. "I want you to end this now, without violence."

For a minute I thought Clarissa might argue, but then she nodded.

But I couldn't let them win.

"*Hestia*!" Fire blasted from my fingertips but never reached them.

It licked at an invisible wall before vanishing.

Blair dropped her hand. "Wonderful."

Meisha crossed her arms over her chest. "We can test her abilities later. Clarissa?"

I held out my hands, waiting for her attack.

Clarissa laughed softly, a familiar sound like the chiming of bells. "Come on, Yara. Rose can't possibly defeat all of us." Her voice was soft as silk, beautiful, and comforting all at once. "Come home with us. Where you'll be safe."

Movement came from behind me as Yara eased around me.

"No!" I cried, reaching out for her. "Don't do this. You can't

possibly trust them."

"We tried," she said, shrugging.

"We aren't beat yet." I willed her to believe me.

She shook her head. "I don't really know what's going on, but maybe you're wrong."

"I'm not."

Her gaze slid from the valley below us back to me. "I'm sorry."

Then she turned and walked away, to stand beside the witches.

Sirena grabbed my arm as she maneuvered in front of me.

Fear clenched my heart. Not her too!

"This can't end well." She paused, tears in her eyes. "Maybe we really are wrong."

"But—"

"Rose, I'm not brave like you." She took a deep breath, and tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm going back with them."

My heart rang, a lonely bell.

"No," I whispered, the word dripping with betrayal.

Tears streamed down her face. "I'm your best friend. If you tell me to stay, I will."

I blinked in shock. "I can't just tell you what to do."

What if I really was wrong?

"I just want to be safe."

I knew what I'd heard. I knew what I felt, but I couldn't tell her what to do. Her life was too valuable to me. It had to be her decision.

"Choose for yourself."

Her gaze darted from me to the women.

"Sweetheart, let's go back in the castle where it's safe and warm." Clarissa's tone was that of a loving mother.

Sirena squeezed my hand and then released it, before leaving me standing on the bridge. Alone.

"Now you." Clarissa smiled at me, her lovely face blossoming into something inhumanely stunning as her attention turned to me. "Let's stop playing this game."

Warmth spread over my skin, and a cloud of softness filled my thoughts. Going back to the castle did sound nice. Not fighting anymore sounded even better. Sirena was right.

My necklace blazed, clearing the fuzzy feeling from my head, and renewing my strength. I straightened my spine, pulling the jagged stone from beneath my dress and gripping it in my palm.

What had I been thinking? Why would I possibly go back with these women, after what I heard?

"I won't go with you! Let me go home, or you'll regret it."

Meisha's voice came to me as if from a great distance. "Join us now. It is your only choice."

Then, she tried to usher the girls away from the edge.

Sirena paused. “Come on, Rose. Come with us.”

My heart ached. “You know I can’t do that.”

She turned to Blair, nibbling on her bottom lip. “Can’t you just let her go? You said it was our choice whether we wanted to join you or not.”

Clarissa answered, her eyes wide and innocent again. “Not to worry. We’ll take care of her”

A peaceful smile danced across Sirena’s face as she turned back to me. “You’ll be safe.”

Horror filled me as Meisha led her out of my view.

“You’re using magic on her!” I accused Clarissa.

Her eyes narrowed. “It certainly took you long enough to figure that out.” The fury in her expression, accompanied with the venom in her words changed her back into the dangerous creature that seemed to be her other half. “Now, what are you going to do?”

I turned to Blair. “Let us go.”

Her brows wrinkled. “You know I can’t.”

I glared at her, even as the wind whipped my hair into my eyes.

“I’ll still forgive you,” she said, reaching out. “We’ll simply go back to the castle and pretend this never happened.”

I took several steps backward, shaking my head.

But to my surprise, it was Clarissa who pushed Blair’s hand away. “You’d forgive her still?” she screeched. “After all she’s done!” She took several furious breaths. “You’re blinded by her magic, just as you were by her mother’s. I told you that she was trouble, but you risked it all for *her*. Now, you’ll pay for your mistake.”

“Clarissa—” Blair said, her name a warning.

In the blink of an eye, Clarissa was kneeling on the ground, a glowing dagger raised above her head. Blair reached for her, her mouth twisted into an unspoken word, but the sound of Clarissa’s shout blocked out all else.

“*Ahhhh*!” she screamed, bringing her dagger down onto the glass bridge.

It shattered beneath her angry blow.

For one horrifying second, my feet slid on the pieces of glass as they came apart, and my stomach lurched. A sense of a nightmare coming to life exploded in my chest, and then the world sped up.

Air whooshed around me, and I fell back, plunging into the darkness below.

Rose

I'D FALLEN into another world. A world of pain. A world of darkness. It threatened to swallow me. To consume me.

Sharp stabs of fire ravaged my body. I screamed and screamed until my throat was raw. And then, numbness washed over me. The reprieve from the pain left me empty, like a shell, and a word came to my lips. The same word I'd screamed over and over again as I fell.

"*Soteria*." I whispered the name of The Goddess of Protection, Safety, and Salvation. Only now, it wasn't said with fear and horror, it was a word spoken from a dying girl, born of pain, but created to bring comfort. "*Soteria*." Tears escaped, making a warm trail on my frozen skin. "*Soteria*." I gasped, and shuddered, closing my eyes at last.

A tingle spread over my body. Every hair stood on end. Was this my final moment? Was this what it felt like before one entered the Underworld?

The sensation of being cold was the first thing that returned to me, making me aware of my body. The cold was everywhere at first, dancing over my skin, seeping down into my shattered bones and broken flesh. But slowly the sensation of warmth came, only it was the warmth of my blood pooling beneath my body.

I was aware of myself, ready to open my eyes, but what world was I waking into? It could be the place of snow and blood, the place where I was losing a battle with death. Or, I could awaken to find myself staring into the face of Ordunne, the eyeless guide to the Underworld. But, would he lead me to the sweet fields of the righteous, or the dark caves of those who would suffer even in death for their crimes in life? I wasn't sure I was ready to find out.

Sharp pain pierced the skin at my throat, taking the decision from me. My eyes snapped open to peer into the face of someone I'd never known.

The young man's eyes were like ocean waves, pale blue, dark blue,

and white swirled together, brimming with both energy and life. They drew me in, as if nothing outside of those pools of blue existed… until the masculine lines of his face shifted, as his muscles clenched.

I escaped his gaze only to find the rest of him equally fascinating. Scars danced along the curve of his jaw and spread out like a web on one side of his neck. It was so like my father's, like a painting done by the same artist. My gaze followed each line as if understanding them would help me to understand my father.

Only, this man's scars weren't pale, but slightly pink and puckered. Either they were recent or hadn't healed well.

Another movement caught my eye. In his hand, he clenched a sword that bit into the flesh of my neck. Overhead, the fog had begun to thin, and early morning sunlight shone through it, giving the impression of a sky filled with wispy clouds.

How long had I been lying here?

"Give me a reason not to kill you!" he demanded. His startling eyes narrowed, and his grip tightened on his blade. But in his eyes I saw reluctance. He leaned in so close I could feel his warm breath on my face. "What have you done with my sister? What have you done with Sura?"

His blade cut deeper into my throat, and more blood spilled from my body, making me shiver so hard that the sound of my teeth chattering filled my ears. It was not a deep cut, not a death blow, but I could sense that I'd used too much of my powers healing myself already.

The shard of purple rock between my breasts warmed, but for once I drew no strength from the stone. I closed my eyes against the brilliance of the white snow, speckled with my blood.

The need to slip out of consciousness into a dark place where the pain from my still-healing injuries couldn't reach me pressed in my mind. But somehow, I knew that I couldn't. With each second that passed, my body healed. I wouldn't die from my injuries, but I very well could die from the man and his sword.

Something I couldn't allow to happen.

"Please," I said, only the word that choked past my lips was less of a word and more of a gargle, so I tried again. "Please."

He grabbed my chin roughly and pulled me to face him, his pale hair falling into his face, giving me a small reprieve from his prying eyes. "Are you begging me for your life?" he asked, tightening his grip on my chin. "Because we begged you not to take my sister." He released me, pushing his hair back to reveal the determination in his face.

The shard of stone grew warmer at my chest until it burned, but from the fire licking at my flesh, strength grew. "I beg you to release

me. They'll come for me soon, and I plan not to be easy prey." The words were a whisper, but I still took heart from being able to say them.

He sat back on his heels, resting his sword along his knees. "Who will come for you soon?"

His face was of a young man, yet I could see the worries of a man twice his age etched into his calculating expression. Could I trust him? If I judged him wrong, these might be my last words. "The Protectors of Tarak," I said, focusing all my energy on speaking. "I'm running from the witches."

"You're not one of them?" he asked, surprise in his question.

I regarded him carefully. "No."

Reaching down, he flipped over both my wrists. "You haven't been marked?" There was genuine astonishment in his voice.

"Marked?" I asked, confused.

"Goddesses help me," he bowed his head. "I never wanted to hurt someone like you… a woman hoping to escape The Protectors."

The regret in his masculine voice held me enthralled.

"Let me help you." His mesmerizing gaze met mine again.

I struggled to think clearly. "Why would you want to do that?"

He frowned. "Because I hurt you. And, well, because I'd offer sanctuary to anyone fleeing The Protectors." He paused, obviously struggling with what to say next. "Having a similar enemy should make us allies, I think."

Logic said I shouldn't trust a man who just moments before held a sword to my throat, but something had stirred deep inside me, and it trusted him without reservation. "All right."

He rose, his jaw clenching, the movement changing the pattern of the scars. "Can you stand?"

I struggled to prove I could, even though the effort left me winded.

When it took me too long, he swooped down, wrapping his free arm around my waist, and pulling me up so that I stood.

I swayed on my feet and looked down at the ground. Around me, the snow was crimson; spreading out so far that I wondered that any blood was left in my body.

"What happened to you?" he asked breathlessly. His jaw had dropped open. His face twisted into horror and surprise, as he inched his way out of the blood that seeped out to touch his boot.

"I fell from the bridge."

His grip tightened on my waist. "I heard the noise; I saw the pieces of glass fall from the sky. But when I saw you still breathing, I couldn't believe you'd fallen from above."

I shuddered in his arms.

His hold, as well as his tone, gentled. "How are you alive?"

“I don’t know,” I murmured, and then I remembered the word I’d shouted as I fell. The word I’d whispered as I died. It was the name of the Goddess of Protection.

“The witches must have used their powers to protect you.” He brushed hair out of my face with such gentleness my breath caught in my throat. “They must want you alive.”

I exhaled loudly, trying to ignore the warmth left by his touch on my cheek. “That must be it.”

Lying felt wrong, but telling him the truth felt like too much, especially when just minutes before he’d had a sword to my throat.

“Can you walk?”

I nodded, although I wasn’t entirely sure.

His arm slid from my waist. It lingered protectively as I recovered my balance, and then he stepped further from me. “Good, because we’ve got a long way to go.”

I ran my hands along my body, searching for the source of all the blood beneath me, but saw nothing. My green dress and cloak were drenched in multiple places, but I was in one piece.

Moving my limbs, I took slow steps forward. My body ached, but nothing felt broken.

I stared at my hands. Was I really walking away from such a fall without a scratch? My stomach churned. I’d never heard of magic this powerful before, but perhaps it was the goddess’s name that was powerful, not me. I wish I understood this world of magic better.

“The only injury I see is the one I caused.” He drew closer to me, inspecting my neck with a look of immense regret.

“Is it bad?” I reached up and touched my neck, pulling away to inspect the blood on my fingertips.

“Here.” He pressed a pale blue handkerchief to my throat, then after a moment drew it away.

“It doesn’t look too bad.” He stared hard at my throat. “Although I think it’ll leave a scar.”

In that moment, I could’ve cared less about the stinging at my throat. All I wanted to do is go somewhere warm and sleep.

“I’m sorry,” he said, handing me the handkerchief without touching me. “I don’t normally hurt women, but Protectors, well they aren’t women.”

“Forget it.” I didn’t want to have this conversation now, not while I was trying my best not to sway on my feet.

“What’s your name?” he asked, his gaze raking over me.

“Rose,” I whispered, trying to keep my thoughts from showing on my face “Rosalyn Vidoryn. And yours?”

His eyes widened.

My words struck me with the force of a blow. Had I really just

given him my full name? Never before had I been so careless, so foolish.

"My name's… Asher Hant."

Our eyes locked, and a strange tingle passed over my body. It was an unwise thing to give one's full name. We'd both just taken a huge risk, an unwise one.

I wouldn't use his name to harm him, but if he ever found a woman of magic, a Protector or a witch, and could determine how my true name should be spoken, I'd regret this moment for the remainder of my life. And yet, I'd be ignorant to believe the feelings stirring inside of me were all due to fear, and not something greater.

"It's nice to meet you," I said, concentrating once more on moving my stiff muscles.

The strange sensation of being watched swept over me as I squinted, peering at the fog above. I wanted to believe The Order would simply accept that I was dead, however, it couldn't be so easy. Even though I could see nothing of the three women I could *feel* them, even from such a great distance.

Shivering, I forced my gaze back to the man. "Where are we going?"

He frowned, but his indecision only drew attention to the fact that he was remarkably handsome. "To a place where you can hide. Is that what you want?"

My heart raced. "Yes." *Until I can find a way to save Sirena.*

Sirena.

Just thinking of her sent terror racing through me. She was still with those women. Would she be safe until I could return? And how could I save her, without just getting myself caught again?

My head ached. I needed to push away such impossible thoughts until I'd at least rested a bit.

He re-sheathed his sword, and swept his white cloak over his shoulders, hiding his dark clothes underneath. Then, he drew the hood over his head. "This way."

I followed him without a word. My body hummed with pain at each step I took, but also the hard rock in my stomach eased. The women would likely search for me soon, and the further away I could get, the better.

The air grew colder as time passed. But in the valley, the wind wasn't so fierce. My cloak offered me some protection, even though the wet spots of blood chilled my skin. We ducked beneath trees laden with snow and climbed over boulders. He moved ahead of me with practiced ease, but waited patiently as I followed.

The valley I'd entered seemed to have been carved out of the world by the goddesses. Towering walls of rock rose from two sides of the

valley as far as the eye could see. Each layer of the earth stood out along the wall in glorious reds and browns, except where a few scraggly trees and plants managed to take root and grow, showing tenacity just through their survival.

But the longer we traveled, the more my body ached. My back and sides pulled with every move until each breath I took was more a gasp of pain. At last, I stumbled and fell to my knees. I tried to rise with all my might, but each gasp became a sob.

Asher came back and knelt beside me. “We can rest for a time.” His voice was gentle.

I shook my head. “We shouldn’t. I can go on.” Tightening my muscles, I tried to rise, but pain shot through me. “*Oh goddesses*!”

He touched my arm. “You’re hurting.”

“I’m not,” I denied.

Pain could be overcome. Ignored. If a job needed to be done, a person simply needed to do it, not complain about it.

He didn’t speak for a long time, just sat beside me in the snow as I struggled to rise.

“I’m not weak.” I spoke between clenched teeth.

“Of course you’re not. You’ve just been badly hurt.”

I shook my head. “That’s not an excuse.” I tried to stand again. He gripped my arm and pulled me into his lap.

Sitting in his lap should’ve felt strange, but instead, it simply felt right. Warm and safe and as natural as a pinecone on a pine tree.

His arms wrapped around me. “Who taught you to be so…?”

“Stubborn?” I finished, closing my eyes.

He held me tighter. “No.” His chest heaved with rapid breaths. “Who treated you so cruelly?”

His response shocked me. No one had been cruel to me. It’s just been my father and I for so long. He never struck me, never yelled, but nor did he speak words of love. Never was there a warm pair of arms to hold me against my sadness or loneliness.

None but Sirena’s, and now she was a prisoner.

“You’re trembling,” he said, holding me tighter.

And I was.

My body betrayed me, shook with the pain I refused to acknowledge. But I couldn’t let him think it was in fear, or that I was some victim too afraid to tell the truth.

“No one ever hurt me.” I started, not knowing quite how to begin. “My mother left when I was three, and it destroyed my father. We spent our days in silence. When he wasn’t working our farm, he was drinking and whittling before the fire.”

Asher made a soft sound as he rested his chin on the top of my head, but said nothing.

So I continued, wanting to make sure he completely understood. “We worked alongside each other on the farm. And if I hurt myself, I just worked through it. I needed… I wanted my father to see he could count on me.”

His chin brushed my hair. “Your father should’ve been the one to show *you* he could be counted on. He shouldn’t have allowed his grief to overwhelm his responsibility to care for you.”

I met his steely gaze without thinking. Anger, frustration, and understanding all painted his face. And unlike my father, Asher held nothing back. Everything he felt was right there for me to see.

“So you don’t think,” I paused. Never before had I asked this question of anyone, not even Sirena. Why would I ask it to a man I barely knew? “I was lucky that he didn’t abandon me as some fathers might’ve?”

His mouth curled in disgust. “No. If I’d have been there, I would’ve told him to deal with his grief like a man, and put his child first.”

My heart felt like it grew.

I closed my eyes against the tears. Asher didn’t know me or my father. He had no reason to lie to me. And the words he spoke eased a little of the sadness I’d been carrying around for so long. Asher thought I deserved better than my father, so perhaps I did.

“Thank you.”

His eyes were pools glinting beneath the sunlight. ‘You’re welcome.”

He touched my cheek with the pad of his thumb.

The imprint seared into my flesh, heating my entire body.

His eyes darkened, no longer a pool but a well of unspoken feelings. He lowered his head, pausing when his lips almost touched mine.

He waited.

I waited.

And then, he kissed me.

Our breathing stopped. His heartbeat in pace with my own. A connection infinitely stronger than the waves of the ocean or the charging of a bull snapped into place.

Our breathing started again. His warm lips pressed against mine, sealing us together forever with a kiss.

He pulled back. His eyes wide. “How did you—?”

I shook my head, curling my hand against my chest to keep from touching him.

He looked away, staring up at the sky. The muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched. “Can you walk now?”

Energy pulsed through me. My pain had receded, still there, but no longer unbearable. “Yes.”

He stood and set me on my feet. His hands staying around my waist until he seemed confident I wouldn't fall.

With jerky movements, he ran a hand through his hair. "We should keep going then."

The gentleness was gone from his voice. Instead, he sounded like a soldier giving an order.

I pushed aside the fluttering in my heart. Had I just imagined it all? That sense of homecoming? Of two halves making a whole?

Of course I had. It'd just been a kiss. My *first* kiss. Nothing more.

We walked on in silence. His back stiff.

As time passed, the walls of rock began to widen and the valley grew. It was no longer a place torn out of the ground, but instead, a place the walls had risen around. Ahead of us, smoke rose above the treetops, disappearing into the fog.

I froze. "Where are you taking me?"

He paused. "To my home."

"You live *here*?"

"Yes." He turned around but didn't look at me; instead, he brushed snow from his white cloak.

I slumped against a tree, glancing around at the inhospitable landscape. "Is it always so cold?"

He ran a hand through his blond hair, giving it the endearing look of someone just out of bed. "The Protectors enchanted this valley, making it forever winter."

"Then how do you live?"

Using the toe of his booted foot, he kicked at the snow. And I realized, he seemed to be trying to look at anything but me. "There are creatures of unbelievable rarity here, which we capture or kill for trade."

I frowned. "But who do you trade with?"

Anger sparked in his gaze. "There are no other villages here. Our traders must walk for weeks in order to reach the portal, which the witches *graciously* allow us to use to get to trading towns."

"You can't use the portals yourself?"

He stared, hard. "Only people with magic can. I thought everyone knew that."

Did most people? It seemed like something I'd have heard of. "Well, I didn't. It was just today that I saw a portal being used for the first time."

"Really?" his brows rose in surprise. "In most cities, portals are used by whoever can pay the witches to take them through." He paused, his voice filled with venom. "We even have one in Wintercarve, but we guard it so the witches can't use it.

The idea that portals ran through the entire kingdom of Tarak, and

were regularly used for transportation, shocked me, but I refused to let him see how ignorant I was. “Well, that’s not how it works in our town. No one uses the portal for traveling”

He shrugged. “I’ve heard The Protectors don’t bother to station their people at towns they consider insignificant.”

Duggery was tucked away in the center of a great forest, far from any major road, so he might be right. “That makes sense.”

He stared at me for so long, my brain turned to slush as I tried to think of something more to say. “We better keep going.”

I nodded, strangely disappointed.

“But let me handle things, all right?”

“Handle what?” I asked, confused.

“The only strangers that come here are witches, so we might not get the best reception.” Uncertainty filled his words. “Just stay close to me.”

“Of course.”

We kept walking, and without the strange energy from our kiss coursing through me, my battered body made itself known once more. My steps dragged, slower and slower, until we at last reached the edge of the village. The smell of meat cooking and the sounds of children playing reminded me so keenly of my own village that I paused, surprised by the wave of longing that swept through me.

I kept walking, following him through the snowy paths weaving through the stoutly built wooden buildings. People dressed warmly, in white cloaks of the same soft material as Asher’s, stopped their daily tasks to stare at us as we approached. One man dropped the wood he was holding and rushed into his house, slamming the door behind him. We reached the children playing near the center of town. They took one look at me and ran, cries of fear following them as they did so. My necklace flared to life at my throat, warming the skin and sending me a clear warning. *Be cautious.*

“Are you sure it’s all right for me to be here?” I whispered to Asher.

He turned, but didn’t have time to answer.

A giant of a man stepped into our path. His hair was dark and greasy, his eyes as black as coals, and his fists so large they could crush a babe’s head between his palms. He wore little, a tan vest and brown pants, both made from fine leather, but beneath them, muscles bulged.

“Asher,” the man greeted, reaching his hands out. A ghost of a smile twisted his face, and then his eyes fell on me. The man’s jaw dropped as my escort clasped his unmoving wrists in a brotherly greeting. “What—What—,” he stuttered, stepping back, “is the *meaning* of this!”

His shout echoed through the town and was followed by silence.

“Targanus—” Asher began, but the giant didn’t wait for his explanation. He tossed him aside in one fluid motion.

The man was upon me before I could react. His hands wrapped around my throat, tightening until my breathing became labored. The sound of my heart beating filled my ears, and I dug my nails into the back of his hands. He didn’t react, so I gripped his wrists, and pressed my feet against his chest, kicking out.

My struggles made no difference.

It was strange. I’d thought that The Protectors would be the ones to kill me, but apparently, I’d been wrong. A man I’d never met would choke me to death. Who would have imagined it?

Black edged my vision, and I continued struggling, but my movements grew weaker. with each passing second. I couldn’t believe I would die in this snow, in this strange town, and no one would be there to save Sirena.

I had failed her.

*** **Want to find out what happens next? Then grab your copy of Witch Fire.** ***

About the Author

Lisa Morrow is a life-long reader who treasures fantasy in all forms. Being a middle child in a large family gave her a unique perspective on the world, but few experiences compare to her time spent studying abroad in Cambridge, England and wandering throughout Europe.

After her travels, Lisa settled down in Arizona to teach junior high English, and later, to spend time with her young children, husband, and cats. To some people, her life may seem quiet. But to her, every day is spent in a world colored by the imagination of children, and fantastical worlds created by her very own mind.

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